

HOLMES, TARA J., M.A. Queer Possibilities: Disidentification and Queer Spectatorship In *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right*. (2014)
Directed by Dr. Danielle Bouchard. 100 pp.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the opportunities that the process of disidentification offers to queer spectators of two specific films, *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). Through the interrogation of these particular representations of female sexuality, deeper questions concerning queer failure and queer negativity are uncovered. Queer failure is explored in the two films and then the ideas are applied to broader social issues.

QUEER POSSIBILITIES: DISIDENTIFICATION AND
QUEER SPECTATORSHIP IN *BLACK SWAN*
AND *THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT*

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
2014

Approved by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. Danielle Bouchard, Dr. Emily Edwards, and Dr. Ann Dils for their support and guidance throughout this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. QUEER FAILURES: DISIDENTIFYING WITH <i>BLACK SWAN</i>	29
III. QUEER POSSIBILITIES: DISIDENTIFYING WITH THE FAMILY IN <i>THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT</i>	58
IV. QUEER FUTURES: IMPLICATIONS OF CINEMA	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	96

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will be analyzing the narratives of two mainstream¹ American films, *Black Swan* (2010) and *The Kids Are All Right* (2010)², critically highlighting the representations of non-normative female sexuality in each. I chose these two films for very specific reasons: because each film offers opportunities for queer interpretation and because they are both mainstream American films that were critically acclaimed. The narrative of each film offers a different representation of a ‘lesbian’ and/or a ‘lesbian’ relationship and in analyzing these representations, I will attempt to explore the cultural connotations of what a lesbian is and what constitutes a lesbian act; in doing so, I hope to combat the idea that a cinematic textual representation should represent all lesbians, or really, any lesbian, for that matter.

The questions I will explore in my analysis are: How does a film represent non-normative female sexualities ‘positively’ as opposed to ‘negatively’? Who has the ability

¹ Here, I view “mainstream” as being available to a wide audience and widely known. I specifically chose to analyze mainstream films because I view popular cinema as a vastly important cultural artifact that greatly informs the way we view the world around us and how we come to view ourselves. It is a medium that teaches us what it means to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’, masculine or feminine, and heterosexual or homosexual; therefore, it is intricately connected to our understandings of gender, sexuality, history, and identity (Benshoff and Griffin, 2).

² *Black Swan* and *The Kids are All Right* were nominated for Academy Awards in 2011; both were nominated for Best Motion Picture and Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role. *Black Swan* grossed \$329,398,046 worldwide and was domestically released in 2,407 theatres grossing \$106,954,678. It was nominated for five Academy Awards and Natalie Portman won the award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role. It is now available on DVD and Netflix, as well as has appeared on HBO. *The Kids are All Right* grossed \$34,705,850 worldwide and was domestically released in 994 theatres grossing \$20,811,365. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and is now available on DVD and Netflix and has appeared on HBO. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/>

to make decisions regarding whether a certain representation is ‘positive’ or ‘negative’? What are the political and intellectual stakes of categorizing representations in this way? With something so complex and nuanced as sexuality, is it possible to cinematically display what constitutes a ‘valid’ lesbian desire? Does the refusal to identify as a ‘lesbian’ invalidate any and all same-sex experiences, making them insignificant? If one identifies as a lesbian and has sex with a man, does that mean that person is not a lesbian anymore? In what ways do these films offer opportunities for disidentification? How do these films exhibit queer failure and in what ways can this be useful for the spectator? I wish to use these questions as a guide in exploring the representations of non-normative sexuality in these two films and approach these films with an open and queer mind in order to investigate the possibilities of representations—and later, (dis)identifications—without imposing on them a queer/straight binary.

In my analysis, I will actively resist labeling the representations as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. Much feminist film theory and queer film theory has an inherent resistance to mainstream cinematic representations that are seen to reinforce homophobia. As Hanson states “We are still in the throes of a lesbian and gay campaign for so-called positive images, representations of sexual minorities as normal, happy, intelligent, kind, sexually well adjusted, professionally adept, politically correct ladies and gentlemen...” (7). When discussing images of ‘lesbians’ on screen, the debate often veers to whether these images ‘positively’ reflect the complexities of a queer reality. Whose ‘reality’ are these images purported to represent? Recuperating certain cinematic portrayals of

lesbians as 'positive' images always does so at the expense of all other images and Other representations:

More significant a problem, however, is the fact that images, even within a subcultural context, always compete within relations of domination where some will be considered positive over others for what are often covertly political reasons. Positive for whom is not merely a question of personal taste but a political question raised within a context where some people's sexuality is still more acceptable than others (Whatling, 84).

Hanson goes on to say that "the very notion of an image that is inherently homophobic or inherently positive strikes me as naïve since the political effects of an image are contingent upon the context of reception" (8). That is, the analysis of cinematic representations needs to keep in mind various considerations that get more nearly at the complexity and the difficulty of representations. As Richard Dyer suggests, "This means...stressing that representations are presentations, always and necessarily entailing the use of the codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation" (2). While representations rely wholly on presently available cultural forms to be intelligible, these cultural forms do not have a single, empirical meaning; people make sense of them in different ways and the meaning of an image is always mediated through a lens of lived experience.

In pushing beyond simply labeling representations using a positive/negative dichotomy, we are then able to complexly question the concepts of correctness, identity, stereotyping, visibility, and authenticity (Hanson, 12). Representations are always in a tension with the reality to which they refer. Because they are re-presentations of representations of reality from an incomplete point of view, representations will never

wholly ‘get’ reality; “...reality is always more extensive and complicated than any system of representation can possibly comprehend...” (Dyer, 3). Foregrounding the complex and difficult nature of representations, rather than simply collapsing images into ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ representations of reality, makes possible the critical analysis of representations as simultaneously productive and problematic. As Ellis Hansen states, “Once I realized that movies are not necessarily good because they reaffirm my politics or flatter my self-esteem, I found a long history of films that address the question of queerness in ways that challenge my mind, delight my eye, and complicate my understanding of sexuality” (11).

Both *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right* contain representations of lesbian experiences—in one film, a woman has a ‘lesbian’ fantasy and the other is about a self-identified lesbian couple. I chose to analyze these two films in particular because each one portrays a lesbian or lesbian experience; but these are very different representations and in very different filmic contexts. While much work has been done on cinematic representations of lesbians in general (Kabir, 1995; Straayer, 1995; Weiss, 1993; Whatling, 1997; White, 1999; Wilton, 1995), in regard to this project, work critiquing *The Kids Are All Right* and *Black Swan* in particular are somewhat lacking in critical engagement (Gibson and Wolske, 2011; Gupta, 2013; Walters, 2012).

While both of these films are American mainstream, they are very different in certain respects. I chose to juxtapose the analysis of these two particular films because one is categorized as a psychological thriller/horror (*Black Swan*) and the other is a drama/comedy. *The Kids Are All Right* was marketed as a film about a same-sex couple

and their journey to maintain their family dynamic once their children seek out their biological father. *Black Swan*, however, was marketed as a movie about a perfectionist ballerina and her descent into madness; the ‘lesbian’ experience between the two main characters has very much been critically overlooked.³ Even in a review of the film done by Lesbian News Magazine, the only discussion of the sex scene between Nina (Natalie Portman) and Lily (Mila Kunis) was “The steamiest sex scene between two women in a studio film this year is probably the one between...Natalie Portman and...Mila Kunis...We saw it and it was hot”.⁴ Regardless of the scene’s ‘hotness’, there is much to be interrogated about the cinematic representation of female sexuality in general, and ‘lesbian’ sexuality more specifically.

Throughout this project, it may seem as though I am collapsing the use of ‘lesbian’ and ‘queer’ when referring to spectators of these films as well as the characters in the films themselves. However, I am not setting up ‘queerness’ as something inherently different and somehow ‘better’ than ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, or ‘bisexual’; I base my notion of queerness on Alexander Doty’s in that queerness “...is a quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight” (xv). I find this notion of queerness most productive because it resists the formulation of ‘queer’ as an exclusive category that is “seemingly more complex, progressive, or politically efficacious” than the identity categories of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (Doty, xvii).

³ “One Nut Cracked Ballerina” By: Johnson, Brian D., Maclean's, 00249262, 12/6/2010, Vol. 123, Issue 47.Database: Business Source Complete; “Natalie Portman, a deeply dark 'Black Swan': movie review” By: Rainer, Peter, Christian Science Monitor, 08827729, 12/3/2010.Database: Academic Search Complete; Lesbian News Magazine, Dec 2010

⁴ Lesbian News Magazine, John Esther, Dec 2010

With these particular filmic texts, I found it most productive to use the term queer because each of these texts portrays a range of sexual identities as well as non-heteronormative lifestyles. In this project, then, queer texts, textual elements, or responses to these texts are:

...those discussed with reference to a range or a network of nonstraight ideas. The queerness in these cases might combine the lesbian, the gay, and the bisexual, or it might be a textual queerness not accurately described even by a combination of these labels...queer is used to describe the nonstraight work, positions, pleasures, and readings of people who either don't share the same sexual orientation as that articulated in the texts they are producing or responding to or who don't define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual (or straight, for that matter) (Doty, xviii).

The use of 'non-straight' here is not necessarily synonymous with 'non-heterosexual', either. Straightness, according to Chris Straayer, is "...an elitist discourse played out not only in the mass media but in our legal, medical, and other "cultural" institutions" (180). Straightness not only means 'heterosexual', but also implies white, economically privileged, young, healthy, and beautiful (Straayer, 180). If straightness is always normality, then queerness is always the failure to conform, to belong, and cohere; queerness is the failure to line up with what is normal. In this project, queerness does not solely mean non-normative sexualities or gender identifications, although of course that is certainly a part of it. My conception of queerness is that it represents "...the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances..." (Sedgwick, 8). Queerness then, names other possibilities, other outcomes besides "normal." It is non-linearity, futility, limitation, ineffectiveness, and unproductiveness; ultimately, queerness is activated though negativity rather than positivity (Halberstam, 110). Therefore, like

Halberstam, I choose to establish queerness “as a mode of critique rather than as a new investment in normativity or life or respectability or wholeness or legitimacy” (110-11). The negativity and failure of queerness offers us an escape from the rigid norms that discipline behavior and ultimately allows us to poke holes in “the toxic positivity of contemporary life” (Halberstam, 3).

My first inclination when it came to analyzing *Black Swan* was to push against the use of psychoanalytic theory to guide me in my investigation; yet, anyone who has seen the film itself knows that it is crafted by and through psychoanalytic tropes. While I will be using psychoanalysis as a partial framework, it is by no means my only guiding principle. In fact, while it is useful to use psychoanalysis to interrogate a psychoanalytic-laden horror film, I believe it would be highly unproductive to rely solely on its tenets. Because *Black Swan* is “at all levels of its construction informed by psychoanalytic presuppositions, which both motivate and justify the narrative” (Grant, 181) psychoanalysis, then, becomes inseparable from the very text it is being used to analyze. Using solely psychoanalytic concepts would only allow for the elaboration of “variant descriptions of the generic elements present in the film by virtue of its being the film it is, but in no sense [would it] reveal for the film an unconscious significance that, without [my] analysis would have remained hidden” (Grant, 182). Meaning, by relying only on psychoanalysis, I would only ‘uncover’ what was already there. Therefore, through my analysis I would only make visible what was visible to begin with.

I am not seeking to wholly devalue psychoanalytic theory as a tool for analysis; I will, however, attempt to use psychoanalysis in combination with other theoretical

frameworks in order to push beyond previous understandings. Namely, I will be drawing from Jose Munoz's reworking of psychoanalytic thought with his notion of 'disidentification'⁵ and Chris Straayer's queer viewpoint of feminist film theory. Throughout this work, I will be invoking psychoanalytic terms when referring to spectators of these films as well as the films themselves; but, hopefully I will make it apparent that I am pushing these terms beyond their previous denotations.

In using these two notions as the basis for my theoretical framework, I will be able to complexly engage and analyze not only the filmic representations themselves; but, more importantly, the stakes these representations hold for spectators, and how and in what ways spectators are able to use these images for their benefit. I am aiming to investigate subjectivity through the way certain narrative and filmic constructions position viewers and thus encourage particular readings—that is, how cinematic representations in *Black Swan* and *The Kid Are All Right* are available for queer and heterosexual appropriations alike. In my analysis of these films, I am not aiming to definitively 'claim' these filmic representations as 'positive' for 'lesbian' viewers and I am not arguing that these films are wholly subversive. Each of the representations in these films are fraught with problematic aspects, and, like the identities of the spectators who view them, they are complex and need to be treated as such.

My project is to question how, why, and to whom these particular images mean and what those meanings can offer. Both *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right* have certainly not been touted as the quintessential cinematic lesbian representation; they have

⁵ I will elaborate on the meaning of this concept later in the piece.

received their fair share of criticism. However, the questions I pose have nothing to do with the correctness of their politics, or their closeness to exhibiting the social reality of lesbianism. In fact, analyzing the political correctness of these two films is to assume that lesbian identity is a homogenous category in which the constituency all has the same political values. Formations of identity are often articulated as contradictory by subjects themselves; identity is articulated in various discourses, in various ways, at various levels. Because of this, we do not experience a film solely through any one aspect of identity.

My analysis of *Black Swan* will somewhat hinge on its genre placement as a horror film. If the purpose of horror films is to show us our worst fears, to make us question our own identity as human beings, then *Black Swan* necessarily fits into this genre. Nina experiences the precariousness of human identity in several ways; she loses her identity through her descent into insanity, she has delusions of herself as an Other that is psychically present, she literally loses her human identity by transforming into a swan, and finally, she loses her assumed exclusive heterosexual identity when she has sex with another woman. Not only does *Black Swan* contain frightening scenes, it also deals with vulnerability, alienation, the horror of the unknown, the fear of losing one's identity and, most importantly, the fear of (female) sexuality.

In this section, I will attempt to theorize the character of Nina as a hypothetical lesbian heroine that is at once depicted as a hysteric; in doing so, I hope to uncover the subversive and transgressive powers which disidentification offer the lesbian spectator. What are the stakes for the spectator when the disidentificatory site is characterized as

doubly marginalized, doubly deemed unintelligible; as the hysteric which is simultaneously inside and outside of the symbolic order and as the ‘lesbian’ which as Butler states, “...is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and the nameable” (360).

The Kids are All Right however, depicts a lesbian ‘nuclear family’. A more masculine woman (Annette Benning) plays the ‘man’, who has a job and supports her wife, the more feminine ‘woman’ (Julianne Moore), as well as her two teenage children, a boy and a girl. While this depiction of a queer family structure could be critiqued as being a copy of a heterosexual marriage, I argue that it is precisely through this mimicking of a heterosexual relationship that destabilizes the very idea of the heteronormative family structure.⁶

Much criticism⁷ about this film is centered on the fact that it shows a heteronormative family structure and that much of the plot deals with an affair between one of the lesbians and a man, who happens to be the family’s sperm donor. Again, I chose this film because it depicts a range of sexualities and pushes the boundaries of who can and cannot call themselves a ‘lesbian’. Rather than demarcating what actions do or do not make someone a lesbian, this film portrays a self-identified lesbian who has sex

⁶ This discussion will apply Butler’s notion of imitation: “If heterosexuality is an impossible imitation of itself, and imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original, then the imitative parody of “heterosexuality” —when and where it exists in gay cultures—is always and only an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original. Put in yet a different way, the parodic or imitative effect of gay identities works neither to copy nor to emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (Butler, 362).

⁷ Walters (2012); See Gupta (2013, p110-114) for a discussion of criticism from feminist and queer responses.

with a man and yet continues to self-identify as a lesbian. There are many ways in which one could find this film problematic; but, berating it for its flaws is not my goal. I seek to look at this depiction of a lesbian relationship and analyze it for the opportunities it offers for a range of queer identifications —not just normative lesbian sexuality.

Black Swan and *The Kids Are All Right* both have representations of lesbian sexuality that could potentially be viewed as problematic and ‘negative’; however, through the use of Munoz’s notion of disidentification, I will show how these images can be appropriated for the benefit of lesbian and queer spectators. Munoz sees disidentification as a survival strategy for queers which works both within and outside of the dominant sphere simultaneously (5). It allows for looking at a cultural text and interrogating the problematic aspects while using other aspects as a still valuable, yet mediated site for identification. Munoz’s notion of disidentification is an elaboration of previous ideas, namely Richard Dyer’s reworking of Levi-Strauss’ bricolage and Eve Sedgwick’s notion of queer subjectivity formation in childhood. Sedgwick states that

for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, becomes a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love... (3).

For Munoz, the term ‘disidentification’ exhibits just that: “To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (12). Although

disidentification allows the subject to read oneself into the text at hand, it does not simply mean to pick and choose what one identifies with. Rather, it is “the reworking of those energies that do not elide the ‘harmful’ for contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations” (Munoz, 12). Disidentification is informed very much by Foucauldian understandings of power and discourse: “...disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse. It understands that counter discourse, like discourse can always fluctuate for different ideological ends...” (19). That is, disidentification is a reworking of cinematic images by the subject where a counter discourse can be articulated.

As Foucault says, “...we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (101). Then, rather than viewing these particular lesbian representations as ‘negative’ images that stem from a heteronormative discourse, the subject can disidentify with them in order to enact a counter discourse: “We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 101).

Ultimately, disidentification is enacted as a survival strategy by a minority subject in order to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification (Munoz, 28). The practice of disidentification gives spectators a third identificatory option rather than wholly disavowing the representations or completely assimilating into a

heterosexual matrix. Instead, it is “a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within” (Munoz, 28). Disidentification holds transformative power for the spectator. Queer viewers of *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right*, then, are not just passive receptacles possessed by the paradigms of identification that these narratives produce, “rather, they are active spectators who can mutate and restructure stale patterns within dominant media” (Munoz, 29).

Instead of conceiving of the spectators of these two films as helpless subjects forced to identify with the images which are shown to them, through disidentification, the spectators can actively resist the encoded directives to watch and identify as a heterosexual, or in the case of these two particular films, as a ‘normative’ lesbian (Munoz, 28). Regardless of the critiques of these particular lesbian representations as being ‘negative’, there exists a point of resistance for lesbian spectators⁸ through the use of disidentification:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and re-circuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus disidentification is a step farther than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by dominant culture (Munoz, 31).

⁸ While, of course, for this project and others like it, there is some essentializing done to the category of ‘lesbian’ when referring to spectators; it is necessary to articulate a somewhat cohesive idea of sexual identity from which to theorize. And in doing so, diversity among subjects under the lesbian-signifier are elided. Throughout this project I use the term ‘lesbian’ to describe a subject “who enter a cinema or video store with a self-named identity as lesbian” (Whatling, 5). In taking the speculative spectator to be a self-named lesbian, there is an attempt to account for some individual differences in the spectator. Like Whatling, I understand that using the terms ‘lesbian spectator’ implies a commonality of vision, and “Inferences of lesbian commonality are fraught with dangers, however, and thus for safety’s sake, the lesbian subject most clearly implied in this [project] is...myself” (5).

It is important to note that disidentification is not a process that only takes place when viewing cinematic images, “Disidentifications are strategies that are called on by minoritarian subjects throughout their everyday life” (Munoz, 179). But, by using *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right* as examples of opportunities for disidentification, it is possible to interrogate and further transmit these practices.

Another author who is crucial to this project is Chris Straayer given her work in queer film theory. The text I will be drawing from is *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, in which Straayer introduces a queer viewpoint into feminist film theory where she raises “questions and proposes strategies that reveal subtexts and subversive readings in a more complex system than the patriarchal heterosexual system assumes” (2). Following Straayer, within this project I seek to prioritize the interdependence of author, text, and viewer rather than simply analyzing them individually. Straayer works against the idea that queer spectators’ desire is inherently suppressed by film conventions; instead, she asserts that “homosexual desire incites a critical disruption that uncovers radical viewing practices and generates momentous questions about textual flexibility” (3).

Straayer believes that feminist film theory has much to gain from considering lesbian desire and sexuality because women’s desire for other women deconstructs the male-female sexual dichotomy (9). Therefore, the interrogation of lesbian desire in cinematic representations holds opportunity: “Acknowledgement of the female-initiated active sexuality and sexualized activity of lesbians has the potential to reopen a space in which heterosexual women as well as lesbians can exercise self-determined pleasure” (Straayer, 9).

However, in her analysis, Straayer is only concerned with films that do not explicitly depict lesbianism, but only offer sites for lesbian intervention in the text. Both of the films I will be interrogating have very explicit lesbian representations. In *Black Swan*, while there is ample opportunity in the text for lesbian intervention, there is a particular scene where Nina and Lily have sex. In *The Kids Are All Right*, the two main characters are self-identified lesbians in a committed relationship. While keeping Straayer's useful analysis in mind, I am led to ask certain questions: What are the options for a lesbian viewer when the film does explicitly depict lesbian acts? Are Straayer's formulations still a viable tool for analysis? I will attempt to come back to these questions later.

However, one notion from Straayer that is particularly useful in analyzing *Black Swan* is the term 'hypothetical lesbian heroine', which she uses to indicate that "neither the character's lesbianism nor her heroism is an obvious fact..." (9). I insist that Nina's 'lesbianism' is not an obvious fact of the film because, like Straayer, I understand 'lesbian' to be an incoherent identity category: "In other words, lesbianism has no absolute condition, no defining criteria by which to judge oneself or others as lesbian. There is no lesbian referent" (Straayer, 29).

The notion of the hypothetical lesbian heroine exemplifies disidentification: "The lesbian heroine in narrative film must be conceived as a viewer construct, short circuiting the very networks that attempt to forbid her energy. She is constructed through contradictions within the text and between text and viewer, who insists on assertive, even transgressive, identification and seeing" (Straayer, 10). The lesbian spectator of *Black*

Swan is very much positioned to not only see Nina as not a lesbian, but also see her as a tragic figure rather than a heroine. To disidentify with Nina in order to still find her a productive and useful site for identification by a lesbian spectator shows the subversive potential of rearranging certain stereotypes of female sexuality.

Nina is the hypothetical lesbian heroine in another way as well. While Nina exhibits same sex desire for Lily, she also has heterosexual sexual encounters. Straayer argues that, like in all films, lesbian films are under pressure to adhere to the convention of climactic coupling; “In mainstream films about lesbians, only one bond needs to be broken in order to restore the façade of exclusive heterosexuality” (32). If this is true, then Nina’s sexuality is doubly ambiguous; because her ‘lesbianism’ is never an explicit fact, and because she erotically engages with a man. Yet, contradictions still arise. Because Nina is shown having sex with a woman as well as taking part in heterosexuality, the reading of this narrative could go either way and allow for the spectator to create multiple and ambivalent interpretations: “These very contradictions and opposing intentions cause the gaps and ambiguous figurations that allow lesbian readings” (Straayer, 21). Perhaps the narrative does try to abort the possibility of a homoerotic relationship between Nina and Lily, yet there is an opportunity for disidentification here that allows the lesbian spectator to rework the narrative and, if not see Nina herself as a lesbian, at least see her as exhibiting lesbian-like tendencies. This practice of disidentification certainly does not replace the heterosexual film event, “but, rather offers additions and alternative to account for homosexual viewership and desire” (Straayer, 22). It is possible to view Nina’s journey as being confined by the structures of

heteronormativity. She is sexually inexperienced, encouraged by a man to be more sexual, has sex with a woman, and presumably dies at the end. We could view this as her deviant sexuality being punished; yet, it is also possible to disidentify with this representation of Nina and view her as depicting sexual fluidity.

Instead of seeing this particular representation of female sexuality as negative, we can view the representation of Nina's sexual identity in a more complex light, one that acknowledges identity "is provisional, ever precarious, dependent upon and constantly changed by an unstable relation of unconscious forces, changing social and personal meanings, and historical contingencies" (Straayer, 36). Keeping this in mind will help to complicate understandings of sexuality and cinematic representations of sexuality. It is also possible to productively disidentify with the cinematic representation in *The Kids Are All Right*. We must recognize the problematic aspects of the film, such as the treatment of people of color, and rework the film into something useful. If we view the film in this particular way, it is possible to critically analyze the film for its problematic aspects while simultaneously engaging with it as a vehicle for imaging alternative familial structures.

Much of the previous scholarship on cinematic representations of homosexuals has either focused on male homosexuality, overlooking female sexuality and demarcating 'lesbians' as invisible or, in my opinion, focuses too much on psychoanalysis and the effects of lesbian representations on female spectators. In my search for sources to incorporate in this thesis, I did my best to exclude books whose focus was on male homosexuality and instead acquired books which focused specifically on lesbians. Even

in my attempts to do so, there were a few books concerned with Queer Cinema—and these still seemed to highlight male homosexuality over female homosexuality. Other books analyze and explore only avant-garde, independent, art house, classic cinema, or specifically ‘lesbian films’, which leaves a gap in scholarship on lesbian representations in mainstream popular cinema.

When some scholarship highlights lesbian representations in mainstream popular cinema, it seems to situate it in a binary, demarcating these portrayals as having the potential to be detrimental to lesbian spectators (Jenkins, 2005; Kaplan, 1990; Love, 2004; Mulvey, 1975; Smelik, 1998; Walters, 2012; Weiss, 1993; Wirthlin, 2009). Too often in these analyses of lesbian representation in popular cinema, there seems to be an implicit assumption that spectators are passive receptacles that do not hold any interpretive power (Kaplan, 1990; Mulvey, 1975; Smelik, 1998). I however will hopefully show that it is ultimately “we who complete the thoughts of film, who decide, if we so wish, on the ideas to be gained from a film” (Frampton, 10). It is important to critically investigate mainstream cinema rather than dismissing it as simply a vehicle for the dominant ideology. While mainstream cinema may very well be nothing more than the telling and re-telling of the dominant ideology, I believe it still has the potential to reach and influence the widest audience.⁹

In 1991, Bad Object-Choices published *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* which is a book of six papers presented at a conference in 1988 all dealing with queer

⁹ I agree with Benshoff and Griffin in viewing that “...it is within the sphere of popular culture that many people probably learn what they do know about sex and sexuality...” (2). Therefore, if these two films were able to reach a wide audience, it would stand to reason that they had or have some sort of influence on the way we view sexuality.

representation in film. Much of the scholarship deals with analyzing queer representations in sexually explicit material and two of the chapters are dedicated explicitly to female homosexuality: Judith Mayne's "Lesbian Looks" and Teresa de Lauretis' "Film and the Visible." In "Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship," Mayne explores in depth one of Arzner's films, *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) and the tensions surrounding Arzner's lesbian authorship and her supposed identification as a lesbian. Mayne offers a detailed analysis of Arzner and her reception by feminist film studies and gay and lesbian studies; maintaining that there is a difference in how Arzner and her films are represented in each respective field. Feminist film studies seem to investigate her films and the ambiguous representation of lesbian desire and gay and lesbian studies seems to only be concerned with the fact that Arzner's particular dress and style characterizes her as a lesbian. Feminist film theorists latched on to Arzner's work because she was a famous female director, the focus was not on her personal sexual orientation; gay and lesbian studies seem to focus more on the fact that her style and presentation codes her as being a lesbian.

While this piece wasn't necessarily useful to my project, it does raise interesting questions about lesbian authorship and lesbian narrative content and if the two must always be compatible. Mayne argues that Arzner's identity as a lesbian was integral in her construction of female-female desire within her films. This is an interesting question; but, in keeping with Barthes' notion of the death of the author, it could be seen that giving these films a director, "is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 147). While it is important to look at Arzner's

authorship, one should keep in mind who is speaking, the text or the author, and what sort of limits does that impose or options does it open up? I, however, do not necessarily believe that one must “be a lesbian” in order to make a film that represents lesbians, lesbian desire, or female same-sex experiences.

De Lauretis’ “Film and the Visible” explores the film *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987) in regards to lesbian representation and spectatorship. She uses psychoanalysis and the idea of lesbian fantasy and the effects on and options this representation offers for lesbian spectators. In her exploration of this film, she focuses extensively on fantasy and the construction of lesbian desire and argues that the film’s reclamation of fantasy and voyeurism is important because it specifically rearticulates it in lesbian terms. This idea of fantasy and voyeurism is extremely important to my analysis of *Black Swan* and I intend to use de Lauretis’ argument about visible ‘lesbian’ desire in my paper. As de Lauretis shows, it is what is visible, what can be seen, that is what is really important in this film; it seems to me, that whether it is a ‘fantasy’ or not is of lesser importance than the fact that lesbian desire is explicitly articulated on screen. This piece is extremely pertinent to my investigation into the visible ‘lesbian’ desire in *Black Swan* and what this means for female spectators—lesbian or heterosexual.

In *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*, Andrea Weiss focuses on what she believes are significant changes in the visual representations of lesbianism and explores the meanings behind the changes in representation and what this could potentially mean for lesbian spectators. In her investigation, Weiss chronologically maps the changes in representations from the Silent Era to Post-War to Lesbian Independent film while also

historically situating the representations. It seems that Weiss finds many of the representations problematic, but as she states in the beginning, we must look for the visible and invisible as forms of representation (2) and keep in mind the various ways lesbians were and are still able to subvert aspects of cinema in order to construct identities. She believes that we must look for signs within the films that would have different meanings for lesbian spectators than they do for western culture at large (2). In looking at the visible and reading into the invisible, lesbian spectators are able to subvert dominant Hollywood cinematic codes and still find pleasure in mainstream cinema; “In more recent films that naturalize lesbian desire...lesbians can either invent their own narratives that allow the lesbianism to be enacted or can become engaged with the film through an attraction to one of the characters” (83). While *Vampires* is slightly outdated, it still offers relevant criticisms that can be used to analyze lesbian representations today.

In *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image*, Tasmin Wilton builds on what Weiss started—it is the first collection of essays devoted to lesbians and the moving image. The book combines varying perspectives from sociology, feminism, queer theory, psychoanalysis, and literary theory in order to “make space in film studies and cultural studies for the specificity of lesbian thinking, lesbian oppression and lesbian resistance” (3). Following again the path of Weiss, this collection aims to create meaning out of both the visible and invisible. All of the essays included are relevant in one way or another to my paper, but specifically “On Not Being Lady Macbeth” which challenges the dominant psychoanalytic paradigm that prevails in explaining lesbian spectators. Wilton instead suggests that we should attempt to analyze spectating from a sociological perspective

because lesbian visual pleasure is ‘not allowable’ in psychoanalytic film theory. Ros Jennings’ “Desire and Design” is also an important piece because of the analysis of Ripley, the main character in the *Alien* films. Jennings argues that the character of Ripley encapsulates many different sexual possibilities because her sexual orientation is never explicitly discussed. This argument would lend well to my analysis of the character Nina Sayers in *Black Swan*. Overall, the collection of essays in *Immortal, Invisible* are all very pertinent even while being dated.

Chris Straayer’s *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientation in Film and Video* looks to ‘queer’ feminist film theory by arguing for a reworking of the heterosexist assumptions inherent in most film theory. Straayer says “Although numerous works by feminist film theorists allude to a lesbian perspective as a potentially disruptive force, few have activated that potential within their theory” (5) and calls for an alternative understanding of the opportunities which the cinematic experiences offers. Straayer analyzes a number of different sources, some explicitly gay and lesbian in content and even some texts which she refers to as ‘by nonstraight heterosexuals’, meaning people who are heterosexual in orientation but push against the privileged status it represents. This idea is extremely useful—Straayer views sexuality and gender on a continuum rather than as binaries.

Clare Whatling’s *Screen Dreams: Fantasising Lesbians in Film*, unlike many books, is not necessarily concerned with looking for visual representation of the lesbian figure; rather, she is concerned with the opportunities for appropriating the text in order to satisfy her own lesbian desires. This book is different from any of the other sources I

encountered in the sense that at the beginning, Whatling makes explicitly clear that she is discussing films that specifically affected her and analyzing the experiences and pleasures she felt as a spectator with lesbian desire.

She argues that there is no such thing as a 'lesbian' film and that the power of interpretation and appropriation lies with the desire of the spectator. Whatling believes "[the spectator] has enormous power to shape the meaning of a given film text, and, if she recognizes herself as a lesbian..., enormous investment in appropriating the films she loves to her own desires" (7). I find Whatling's argument compelling, useful, and empowering—throughout the book she gives power to the spectator rather than assuming they are passive receptacles to the films insidious meanings. Whatling employs a psychoanalytic framework in her analysis of mostly mainstream U.S. films; but, she takes the psychoanalytic terminology and reframes it through a lesbian perspective. Her reframing of psychoanalysis in order to account for lesbian sexual desire is vastly important; all too often in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic schools of thought, lesbians do not exist and there is no way to take into account lesbian desire. In exploring lesbian cinematic desire, Whatling uses a modified psychoanalytic framework to "explode the traditional demarcation between being and having through the figure of the femme lesbian whose potential desire for another femme destabilizes the conventions by which lesbian cinematic desire is understood" (7).

In *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film*, Shameem Kabir analyzes lesbian representations in film while not only taking into account heterosexist assumptions, but also assumptions bound up in race and class. Kabir calls for an entirely

new social order rather than just turning the existing one on its head; one where “subjects have actual and not abstract rights to equal subjectivities, and where black and white subjects, men and women, lesbians and gays, can accommodate the plurality of positionings that we all necessarily occupy, in a politics of inclusion and a feminine economy of exchange and not exploitation” (8). Kabir believes it is not enough to simply challenge the dominant order, but instead we must actively engage in changing it. Instead of taking a negative view on the representations of lesbians in cinema, she seeks to enlarge the space available to include the vast range of all lesbian experiences. Kabir’s stance on film is extremely interesting; she is very self-reflexive about her situatedness and about how she views film’s potential for changing the existing social order. The only flaw I found in this book was the fact that Kabir is not a scholar, and while her views and opinions are very valuable and relevant, it’s not technically a ‘scholarly’ piece of work. Kabir also explores subversive and oppositional readings of the texts she presents, and insists on embracing contradictions within them “as a way of destabilizing conventional practices” (230).

Patricia White’s study of lesbian representation is concerned solely with classical Hollywood cinema whose content was governed by the strict Production Code Administration. *Uninvited* draws on queer and feminist film theory, especially feminist psychoanalysis, and looks at how Hollywood films of the past gives pleasure to lesbian spectators and how these films “have constructed our very psychosocial identities and possibilities of self-representation” (17). White argues that while there were certain prohibitions mandated by the PCA, it was impossible to eliminate all lesbian inference.

She maintains that lesbian representability was not so much ‘eliminated’, rather it was directed into different channels and was still able to visually signify queerness even when it could not be explicitly stated. While White’s analysis only looks at classical Hollywood cinema, her reworking of visibility and representation are intriguing.

New Queer Cinema, a collection of essays compiled by Michele Aaron, investigates the wave of queer films that gained popularity in the 1990s. While I would not be engaging with all of the pieces in this book, the chapter titled “The New Queer Spectator” by Michele Aaron is useful for my project. Aaron argues that while queer representations are becoming more prevalent in mainstream cinema, it is only a very specific type of queerness that is accepted—a heterosexualized version of queerness. She also argues that as queerness and queer representation moves into the mainstream, it is losing its critical edge; and while she believes there have been important developments in new queer cinema, we should not have unchecked optimism.

Finally, *Queer Images* examines over a hundred years of queerness in American cinema, surveying a number of different genres from cult films, to documentaries, to Hollywood and deals with issues such as gay stereotypes and queer audiences. This book historically situates a number of representations of queerness within film. I think this book will help ground my work in a historical context rather than my work being completely theoretically based.

In researching scholarship on lesbian representation in cinema, it was difficult for me to find any literature directly dealing with *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right*. Gibson and Wolske’s article “Disciplining Sex in Hollywood: A Critical Comparison of

Blue Valentine and *Black Swan*”, argues that *Black Swan* perpetuates the idea of the lesbian as spectacle. The article heavily emphasizes the notion of the male gaze and contends that the representation of female sexuality in *Black Swan* follows “conventional scripts of the male gaze to code women's bodies as objects of male desire and to discipline the expression of female sexuality” (86). Gibson and Wolske further argue that the “visual and narrative framing reinforce the power of the panoptical male connoisseur by presenting female-female sexuality as a spectacle, by conflating female sexuality with mental illness, and by punishing the expression of female sexuality” (86). While I do not agree with this argument and actually find it to be a very surface-level critique, it will be useful to incorporate another viewpoint into my analysis.

In “Debating *Black Swan*: Gender and Horror”, two scholars, Mark Fisher and Amber Jacobs, discuss and disagree about the meaning behind the film. Fisher views *Black Swan* to be a sort of “Irigarayan” horror film¹⁰ that is subversive in its representation of female sexuality, while Jacobs sees this film as nothing more than a male masturbatory fantasy. Jacobs argues that this film perpetuates and romanticizes the parameters of patriarchal imagery rather than challenging them as Fisher believes. This article takes a psychoanalytic stance of deconstructing *Black Swan* and both authors put Luce Irigaray’s ideas into conversation with the film. Both of these authors bring up important questions about the function of femininity and female sexuality under patriarchy; and it is interesting that within the article, there are two completely different

¹⁰ “That, I suppose, is why I would consider it a work of Irigarayan horror: *Black Swan* gives us many of Irigaray’s negative images of female subjectivity under patriarchy but without laying open any possibility of an alternative” (61).

viewpoints about the same film. Fisher believes it offers options for the subversion of patriarchy while Jacob blames Aronofsky for perpetuating the “mythologies of femininity” (62). I am more inclined to agree with Fisher’s reading of the film; I believe Jacob falls into the trap of automatically writing this film off as a negative representation of female sexuality by naming it “psychic junk” (62) and a male masturbatory fantasy. One of my goals in the reading of *Black Swan* is to push against any inclination to name it as negative or “junk” and my intention is to attempt to offer a complex reading of this film.

In “Picturing Space for Lesbian Nonsexualities: Rethinking Sex-Normative Commitments through *The Kids Are All Right* (2010)”, Gupta examines lesbian sexuality, and nonsexuality, in *The Kids Are All Right* as well as feminist and queer responses to the film. Gupta argues that the film pushes the category of ‘lesbian’ to include asexuality and nonsexuality and believes that feminist and queer responses to the film reject nonsexuality as an aspect of the lesbian experience. Gupta’s argument is very helpful to my project, as it examines *The Kids Are All Right* for an aspect of lesbian sexuality that is outside the normative idea of ‘lesbian’. This article brings to light an excellent point: in analyzing lesbian cinematic representations, we need to take into account all aspects of sexuality and push against the sex-normative assumptions inherent in the categories of ‘lesbian’ and ‘sexuality’.

Walters, however, critiques the representation of lesbian sexuality and gay kinship structures in *The Kids Are All Right* in “The kids are all right but the lesbians aren’t: Queer kinship in US culture.” She argues that the representation of this lesbian couple is

essentially heterosexual through its assertion of a generic, “universal” love story (923). Walters believes that the universality of this film results in “a de-gaying of gayness; the reliance on heteronormative gender paradigms so that the women are depicted as – really – just like our neighbors down the street where daddy goes out to work and mommy stays at home; the invisibility of lesbian culture and lesbian friends” (926). While Walters’ argument is an important one, I will attempt to move away from this critique while still keeping it in mind. In my analysis of this film, I do not disagree with the heterosexualization of the marriage; rather, I contest that the “heterosexualization” of this particular lesbian representation enables us to see heterosexuality as “an impossible imitation of itself, an imitation that performatively constitutes itself as the original...” (Butler, 362).

While I approach this analysis as a student of theory, the underlying motivation for this theoretical endeavor is my passion for movies. I will attempt to write as someone who has deeply visceral, emotional responses to the cinema and I will try to not pretend I am above being affected by film. I do not wish to analyze these two films from an objective viewpoint; rather, I seek to analyze them from a scholarly stance as well as from the stance of a lesbian spectator who was affected by these films.

CHAPTER II

QUEER FAILURES: DISIDENTIFYING WITH *BLACK SWAN*

Darren Aronofsky's 2010 psychological thriller/horror film, *Black Swan*, follows a young ballerina, Nina Sayers, who loses her sanity after being cast as the grueling lead role as both the Black and White Swans in a rendition of Swan Lake. While the film was certainly critically acclaimed, being nominated for five Academy Awards and Natalie Portman taking the Oscar for Best Actress, reviews of the film range from it being hailed as "brilliant"¹ to "unimpressive"². Often in the reviews, Portman is lauded as a tour de force, or Aronofsky's technique and the film's technical marvel are commended as masterful.³ Some critiques have been leveled that the film is vastly pretentious, lacks subtlety, works predominantly through clichés, and is crafted by B-movie horror shenanigans.⁴

Regardless of the praise or the contempt for this film in its entirety, there is one particular scene that has received a lot of attention; albeit it, not of the critical and thoughtful kind. In the middle of the film, there is a scene between Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis in which they have what is culturally understood as 'lesbian' sex. Nina (Portman) and Lily (Kunis) engage in an ecstasy-fueled 'lesbian' tryst, a scene which, unfortunately, has received very little insightful commentary. In a review of the film done

¹ Brian Johnson, Maclean's, Dec. 6th 2010

² Kofi Outlaw, Screenrant.com, Dec. 4th 2010

³ Brian Johnson, Maclean's; Kofi Outlaw, Screenrant;

⁴ Peter Rainer, Christian Science Monitor, Dec 3rd 2010

by Lesbian News Magazine, the only discussion of the sex scene between Nina and Lily was “The steamiest sex scene between two women in a studio film this year is probably the one between...Natalie Portman and...Mila Kunis...We saw it and it was hot.”

While some critiques of female sexuality represented in *Black Swan* are more concerned with the pleasing aesthetics, one particular analysis looks at masochism, “...the trope of female desire gone awry, and the representation of sexual violence directed against one’s own body” within the film (Ritzenhoff, 110). Karen Ritzenhoff argues that while Nina is in charge of her own sexuality, she fails in the capacity to control it (127). She goes on to argue that Aronofsky shows a “regressive, dark side of love and sexuality, an outgrowth of women’s liberation that has ultimately gotten out of control when women determine their own fate” (127). For Ritzenhoff, Nina’s sexuality is a consequence of “The sexual revolution that has allowed women to make choices about their reproductive rights and partners...” but rather than freeing Nina, it has regressed into sexual abstinence which unleashes a “repressed, dysfunctional, and ultimately destructive sexual fantasy” (115). The sexual fantasy in question is none other than the sex scene between Nina and Lily—which Ritzenhoff cites as the ‘dysfunctional’ epicenter of Nina’s psychical unraveling.

Like Ritzenhoff, many reviewers decry this scene as nothing more than a sensationalized sex scene between two attractive women which panders to the Mulvian ‘male gaze’. Gibson and Wolske argue that the sex scene in *Black Swan* presents “female-female sexuality as a spectacle, by conflating female sexuality with mental illness, and by punishing the expression of female sexuality,” and in doing so, preserves

the dominant patriarchal order instead of challenging it (86). Rather than aligning themselves directly with Mulvey's ideation of the cinematic male gaze, Gibson and Wolske take up the notion of a "panoptical male connoisseur" which draws from Foucault's panoptic surveillance and adapts it to show "the ways in which women are subjected to an inspecting patriarchal gaze that disciplines the performance of femininity and the expression of female sexuality" (82).

They go on to assert "A phallogentric gaze...is embedded throughout our systems of representation, reinforcing patriarchal power relations and asserting women's 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in all realms of public and private life" (81). For Gibson and Wolske, the power of the male gaze is so pervasive, embedded in every aspect of cultural discourse, it constantly forces women to view their own bodies and sexuality through a patriarchal gaze, and surely film is not left unscathed by its omnipotent power. Asserting that film is but one site in "a network of disciplinary discourses that regulate the expression of female sexuality," Gibson and Wolske ultimately go on to argue that the spectator of *Black Swan*, "...perhaps finding enjoyment in the spectacle, is also encouraged to witness the severe consequences of female sexual pleasure and to internalize the inspecting patriarchal gaze" (90).

While this can certainly be considered a reasonable conclusion, I nonetheless contend that this is a very surface-level, unproductive reading of the film. As Love states, "Given that the lesbian is so overwritten by cliché, the central criterion for judging lesbian representation tends to be whether it challenges reigning clichés of the lesbian or capitulates to them" (121). No, Aronofsky does not challenge clichés, and cinematic

lesbian representations such as the scene between Nina and Lily should not be confused with the “truth” or “reality” of all contemporary lesbian experience; yet, neither should they be completely dismissed.

In order to critically interrogate the representation of female sexuality in *Black Swan*, it is important to avoid speaking simply of spectatorship or ‘the spectator’ as if these categories were not constituted by numerous axes of difference, including class, culture, sexuality, nationality, etc.; various cultural, historical, and psychical frameworks furnish spectators with certain references that fundamentally impact their cinematic experiences. It is important to keep in mind that power does not just oppress subjects, but it also makes them; “Furthermore, power cannot be understood to operate the same way in making race, class, or sexuality; different kinds of power, operating according to different norms and having different aims, are operative in each instance” (Salamon, 99). We should not assume that any one discourse has so entirely constructed an individual’s cinematic experience that there is absolutely no room for alternative ways of interpreting the filmic representations; it is imperative that we not cast the figurative spectator as a passive, one-dimensional subject. Following Foucault, we must remember that power and discourse are not fixed: “To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one” (101). Imagining that patriarchy and its various discourses are fixed, eternal, ahistorical constructs implies that there is no way out or no other possibilities for being in the world.

To most productively analyze *Black Swan*, it is necessary to actively resist labeling the representation of female sexuality as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. Rather than arguing *Black Swan* perpetuates a patriarchal view of lesbian-as-spectacle, or even trying to recover this representation as a ‘positive’ one, we need to complexly question the concepts of identity, stereotyping, visibility, and authenticity within the film (Hanson, 12). Rather than simply demonizing the representation of female sexuality, we can view the portrayal of Nina’s sexual identity in a more complex light, one that acknowledges identity “is provisional, ever precarious, dependent upon and constantly changed by an unstable relation of unconscious forces, changing social and personal meanings, and historical contingencies” (Straayer, 36).

Regarding *Black Swan* in this way allows us to resist “an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics” (Munoz, 9). Disidentification is a term descriptive of survival strategies that minority subjects use to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Munoz, 4). It must be made clear that the practice of disidentification is not to pick and choose what a subject takes out of identification; it is not to willfully ignore the shameful components within an identificatory possibility. Rather, for queer spectators, it is a process of reading between the dominant text’s lines and actively resisting its encoded directives to watch and identify as a heterosexual; it is the process by which active

spectators can mutate and restructure patterns in dominant media from within. As Munoz says:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications (31).

While the process of disidentification may not be a resistance strategy that is pronounced and direct, it is not wholly the act of following the dominant path in order to survive; "...disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously" (Munoz, 5). What needs to be stressed here is that disidentification is a survival strategy:

...disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation...[It] is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence (Munoz, 161).

Because it is a survival strategy for queers, disidentification is called on by queer subjects throughout their everyday lives. It is a rendering of the self that provides pictures of possible future relations of power. Therefore, "disidentification's use-value is only accessible through the transformative politics that it enables subjects and groups to imagine" (Munoz, 179). Then, it is possible to analyze how *Black Swan* means, to whom it means and in what ways, ultimately allowing for a conception of alternative ways of being in the world.

While it is important to resist thinking of *Black Swan* as a film with inherently negative portrayals of lesbianism, it is also important to resist touting the film, and the sex scene in particular, as an inherently positive representation; doing so would imply a “fixing of a hegemonic viewer, and a corresponding fixing of identification and desire” (Whatling, 85). That is to say, we remember not every self-identified lesbian spectator is the same, nor are they a lesbian in the same type of ways.

My project is not to valorize or vilify this representation in the name of Lesbians or queerness; but, rather to question how, why, and to whom these particular images mean and what those meanings can offer. My interrogation of *Black Swan* has nothing to do with the correctness of its politics, or its closeness to exhibiting the social reality of lesbianism; as Ellis Hanson states “Once I realized that movies are not necessarily good because they reaffirm my politics or flatter my self-esteem, I found a long history of films that address the question of queerness in ways that challenge my mind, delight my eye, and complicate my understanding of sexuality” (11).

In this analysis, I am not seeking to recuperate this film as a ‘positive’ or ‘good’ representation of non-heteronormative sexuality, I’m resisting the trend Ellis Hanson explains:

We are still in the throes of a lesbian and gay campaign for so-called positive images, representations of sexual minorities as normal, happy, intelligent, kind, sexually well adjusted, professionally adept, politically correct ladies and gentleman who have no doubt earned all those elusive civil rights for which we have all been clamoring (7).

In the attempt to recover Nina from the queer shadows and somehow show that she is ‘normal’ or ‘happy’, to argue that Nina is a ‘positive’ image, we capitulate to the notion that ‘normal’ is something worth being. It is to buy into the notion that happiness and success mean money, a family, monogamy, achievement, and fulfillment. Rather than work to repudiate what Nina represents, I seek to embrace the figure of Nina as she is—as representative of the possibilities of queer failure. If queerness is the antithesis of heteronormative ideals, if it is the opposite of heteronormative common sense that equates “success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope,” then Nina embodies queer potentiality.

My embrace of Nina as a failure is in line with Lee Edelman’s figurations about queer negativity; “Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it” (4). Queer negativity in this project attempts to remain “committed to not only scrambling dominant logics of desire but also to contesting homogeneous models of gay identity within which a queer victim stands up to his or her oppressors and emerges a hero” (Halberstam, 147). In doing so, it resists claiming the queer characters for a project of homonormativity.

I am not naming or identifying Nina as a queer; yet, Nina inhabits the figural position of the queer in the sense that she disturbs and disrupts “those congealments of identity that permit us to know and survive as ourselves” (Edelman, 17). While Nina exists in a queer positionality that resists cohesive, stable categories of identity through which individuals experience themselves as subjects, she does not, at any point, offer a

platform from which to articulate an oppositional politics of identity or a position of essential, empowering ‘queerness’; she does not harbor the hope of a better, more moral society or a brighter tomorrow.

In not aligning with heteronormativity and the optimism of the future, Nina’s practice of failure “recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (88). Rather than imagining a fantasy of a queer elsewhere, the figure of Nina allows for conceptualizing alternatives to the existing hegemonic system while simultaneously avoiding the recuperation of this representation for a queer apologist moral project. Sometimes it is more radical to make space for what already is rather than envisioning a precariously utopian future.

The embrace of Nina as embodying queer failure, and thus as “negative” in relation to heteronormative notions of ‘normality,’ does not negate the value this representation holds for queer disidentification. Already adept at the interpretive survival strategy of disidentification, queers are able to rework an image that deviates from heteronormative notions of happiness and success which helps to imagine other goals for life and for being.

This analysis of *Black Swan* is partially dependent on the fact that this movie is categorized as a psychological horror film. If horror films are designed to be unsettling, to cause fright and panic, dread and alarm, show us our worst fears—then *Black Swan* necessarily falls into this category:

Horror is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded that we may be or may become something other than we are or take ourselves for; that our origins as human beings need accounting for and are unaccountable (Cavell, 1979; cited in Grant, 184).

Not only does Nina experience first-hand the precariousness of human identity, she does so in several ways. Nina loses a coherent sense of her Self through her descent into insanity—she actively becomes something other than what she is and what she takes herself to be. She constantly has hallucinations and visions of herself as an Other that is psychically and physically present. Nina literally loses her human identity by emotionally and physically transforming into the Black Swan. And finally, Nina loses her assumed exclusive heterosexual identity when she has sex with another woman, becoming something other than ‘that which she is.’ Not only does *Black Swan* deal with vulnerability, alienation, the horror of the unknown, the fear of losing one’s identity; but, most importantly, the fear of (queer) female sexuality.

The filmic representations of lesbians and queers within the horror genre have quite a long relationship. From the vampire lesbian, to the maniacal woman that loves her friend *a little too much*, to the crazed man-hating serial killer, both have certainly run the gamut when it comes to horror films. In horror films, the monster or villain is often coded as queer and their monstrosity lies in their ‘unnatural’ sexuality. Like Foucault shows us, sexuality has become a synecdoche—it is no longer just an act someone commits, it is their totality; “The...homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology...” (43). The monsters’ unnatural sexuality makes them a monster, it is the unnatural core that affects

every aspect of them, making them unnatural as a whole. Horror films traditionally cast the monster as sexually disturbed or exhibiting gender confusion¹; as Halberstam explains;

This narrowing down of monstrous features to monstrous sex and gender has to do with the success of the hegemonic installation of psychoanalytic interpretations of human subjectivity which understand subjectivity as sexual subjectivity and identity as sexual identity and monstrosity as sexual pathology (24).

No matter what the case, the villain or the monster is always queer, that is, always outside the boundaries of normality.

The character of Nina is not a traditional horror film “monster” in the sense that she is not physically disfigured or hideous and she is not a supernatural creature or a serial killer; she is horrifying and monstrous because her failure to be ‘normal’. Nina’s psyche is the threat and the precariousness of the human psyche is brought to the forefront; we could all become Nina. Nina shows us that the true threat is not the Other, rather, the darkness lies within ourselves. Rather than having a monster that carries out physical attacks, *Black Swan*’s horror lays in the psychological atmosphere and suggestive horror effects. This of course is not a new idea, Hannibal Lecter and Norman Bates were also human monsters with threatening psychologies; but, Nina is something different. She is at once the character we root for and the one we are repulsed by; in *Black Swan*, we are aligned with the ‘monster’, she is “our central character, our primary means of access to the events of the fictional world, and in fact our narrator” (Knight and

¹ Carol Clover makes this argument about killers in slasher films in *Men Women and Chainsaws*, p 27-28.

McKnight, 218). What Nina sees is what the audience sees; the hallucinations, the fantasies, and the transformation into a swan.

The audience experiences the film through the experiences of Nina, so then we experience Nina's failure as well. Analyzing *Black Swan* as a horror film very much lends itself to the notions of disidentification and queer failure. In a general sense, all horror film villains are ultimately failures—they never line up with the 'normal'. We are conditioned as spectators of horror films to view these failures as 'bad', as 'negative', as exemplars of what 'good' must defeat for order to be restored. The figure of the horror villain is something that no 'normal' spectator would wish to identify with. If horror villains never line up with normal, then they are inherently queer; and by the same token, queers are used to being cast as the villain.

The darkness of failure, as Halberstam explains, is an important part of a 'queer aesthetic': "...failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end, in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness. Indeed the darkness becomes a crucial part of a queer aesthetic" (96). According to Halberstam, then, darkness is as much a part of queer as queer is a part of darkness. Halberstam goes on to say that "the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away...nor should they be" (98). Thinking of queers and monsters as being the same in that they are inherently sociosymbolically tied to loss and failure offers a productive site for queer spectators of a horror film.

A queer spectator is able to productively rework the horror movie villain through the process of disidentification "whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by

subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label” (Munoz, 185). Disidentifying with a horror movie villain can be viewed as the management of a certain identity that has been viewed as ‘bad’ by the hegemonic public sphere. Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been spoiled in the majoritarian public sphere: “This management is a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self” (Munoz, 185).

Disidentification reminds us of the Foucauldian “reverse discourse”; the queer spectator who disidentifies with the horror villain is able to “...speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was...disqualified” (101). In terms of *Black Swan*, Nina is cast as the hysterical female; she is paranoid, she hallucinates, she is a failure at creating stable, intimate relationships, her grasp on reality is tenuous, she is an example of how horrifying it is to lose one’s fragile human identity. She is a tragic figure, she does not find love, or happiness, she does not have a happy ending; what Nina represents is what queers all too often hear about themselves from the public sphere. Yet, through the process of disidentification, queer spectators are able to step in, rework the notion of Nina as the hysteric, and walk away with imaginings for new and alternative worlds where failure is a welcome option.

In *Black Swan*, Nina, a young, aspiring ballerina in New York City, is cast in a rendition of *Swan Lake* by the lascivious director, Thomas (Vincent Cassel), who seduces

the ingénue under the guise of pushing her to explore her untapped sexual and artistic expressiveness. As Thomas urges her to overcome her sexual shyness in order to perfectly dance the evil Black Swan, Nina begins experiencing horrifying hallucinations which mark her descent into madness. Burdened with the stress of perfection, Nina starts to break and she is ultimately brought to the dark side by rival dancer Lily, who—effortlessly embodying the perfect Black Swan—threatens to steal Nina’s spotlight. Nina loses herself, succumbing to the evil of the Black Swan, and ultimately kills herself at the end of *Swan Lake*.

However, because the film itself is crafted by and through psychoanalytic tropes, nothing is what it seems on the surface. The overwhelming presence of mirrors in virtually every scene not only reminds us of a ballet studio, but of Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage.” Who else but Freud could write the protagonist as sexually naïve and child-like with an absent father and an overbearing mother, who, upon her entry into adult sexuality manifests symptoms of hysteria in the form of a same-gender desire? Not only is psychoanalytic theory present in *Black Swan* itself, but being a horror film, it seems particularly suited for a psychoanalytic interpretation. While it is important to not rely solely upon psychoanalysis to analyze *Black Swan*, ignoring the psychoanalytic tropes inherent within the film would be just as self-limiting.

At the beginning of the film, Nina is immediately portrayed as juvenile: her body resembles a formless adolescent body and her room is riddled with childish décor. We are introduced to Nina as she lies in her bed, just awakening. Nina looks as though she is in her early to mid-twenties and although she is beautiful, it is very much in the girl next

door type of way. As she sits up in bed, we are able to see that the nightgown she is wearing is pastel pink with pink bows on it. Her bed sheets have flowers on them, her bed spread is pink, along the walls of her room she has a giant pink and white bunny, and her wallpaper has pink and white butterflies. Within the first minute of the film, we are introduced to Nina as if she is a little girl, and she is clearly not that little—there is a striking juxtaposition that is immediately present in the scene of a twenty-something woman waking up in the room of a 8 year old girl.

From the very start, the character of Nina is set up as naïve, young, and fragile. It is only in one of the next scenes when we meet Nina's mother, Erica (Barbara Hershey), that it begins to make sense why Nina is so emotionally juvenile. In the kitchen, Nina sits at the counter top waiting while her mother makes her breakfast. Erica sets down a plate with only half of a grapefruit and one poached egg on it. After they have a brief conversation, Erica walks around the counter with a sweater in hand, "Up" she commands Nina. Nina obeys, standing up, turning around, letting her mother put her sweater on for her. During this scene, she even asks Nina if she should come with her to the ballet studio. This scene accompanied with the décor in Nina's bedroom and Nina's sleeping attire really sets the stage for Nina's fragile psyche. She is a twenty-something living with her mother, who cooks breakfast for her, dresses her, and offers to accompany her to her professional career. While we do not really know the extent of it yet, there is something obviously strange about Nina and her relationship with her mother.

At this point in the film, before Nina even goes to the ballet studio, we understand that she lives a sheltered life. Her mother is very overbearing and overprotective which

leads her to not be able to experience life for herself; this sets the stage for Nina's neurosis. Nina is seemingly kept in a perpetual child-like state by her mother; Erica tucks her in at night, winds a music box for her to fall asleep, clips her finger nails, and even helps her get undressed. In the hysterical subject there exists simultaneously a sexual repression and sexual impulse. Nina's sexuality has very much been hindered by her mother, and her sexual impulse is brought about later in the film through the insistence of her director to be more sexual. Before sex has even been discussed in the film, we understand that Nina is sexually repressed; while it's not explicitly mentioned, the child-like decorations in her room are a metaphor for Nina not having reached adult sexuality.

Thomas, the director, lets the company know that they will be doing a "stripped-down, visceral, real version" of Swan Lake, in which one ballerina will play the role of both the white and black swans. The white swan is 'good', virginal, pure, sweet, and the black swan is lustful and evil. Here we are presented with the major premise of the story—Nina is the pure, sweet, virginal swan, but how will she overcome her inhibitions to succeed in playing the lustful black swan? When auditions come around, Nina dances the white swan to perfection; Thomas says that if he were only casting the white swan, it would definitely be Nina. Next she dances the part of the black swan; interrupted by Lily barging in the door, Nina blows the audition and she leaves the studio feeling devastated.

Nina gets the part after all and Thomas takes her to a fundraising event for the ballet company in order to introduce her to everyone as the Swan Queen. After the event, Thomas suggests that they go back to his apartment and have a drink. As they sit down on the couch to discuss the role of the Swan Queen, Thomas begins by inquiring if Nina

has a boyfriend. Nina responds coyly, looking away, “No.” Thomas continues with this line of questioning, “You’re not a virgin are you?” Nina is immediately embarrassed and made extremely uncomfortable by the question, she looks down, shakes her head, and whispers a very unconvincing “No.” At this point, Nina is visibly very uncomfortable and it is obviously because the conversation is about sex. Next, Thomas asks her if she enjoys having sex; she all together avoids answering this question, she just laughs uncomfortably and looks away. Thomas notices that she is uncomfortable with talking about sex, so he gives her a ‘homework assignment’ which is to “Go home and touch yourself. Live a little.” Thomas believes that Nina’s aversion to sex is what is holding her back from being the perfect black swan; if Nina was only more sexually adventurous, then she would be ‘perfect’. The only thing Nina really wants in her life is to be ‘perfect’, she states it numerous times throughout the film, so she is very easily sexually manipulated by him as a result of her trust and admiration of him. What’s interesting here is that Nina does everything to strive for Thomas, there are no bounds on what she will do to impress him or gain his acceptance. Because the movie is so steeped in psychoanalytic tropes, Thomas becomes a stand-in for Nina’s absent father and therefore another root of her neurosis.

This scene serves to show the audience just how uncomfortable Nina is when it comes to conversations and sex and sexuality. When Thomas asks her if she’s a virgin, although she answers that she is not, it is delivered in a way that seems completely unconvincing. The spectator is unconvinced because we know that she lives with a mother who watches her every move, therefore has most likely been a source of sexual

repression, which leads Nina to be so vastly uncomfortable in situations where sex is discussed. Once Nina begins the journey into her adult sexuality, she becomes delusional, paranoid, and emotionally unstable; or, in the psychoanalytic context of this particular film, Nina becomes the hysteric. At the heart of Freud's notion of the hysteric lies sexuality: "...psychoneuroses, as far as my experience goes, are based on sexual motive powers...the symptoms are the sexual activities of the patient" (36). That is, hysterical symptoms manifest themselves through the sexual activities of the subject.

Hysteria, according to Freud, is caused by the contradictory existence of an immense sexual desire and an exaggerated sexual rejection: "In most psychoneurotics the disease first appears after puberty following the demands of the normal sexual life...the fact of the matter is that the sexual repression has to be added as an inner factor to such external ones as restrictions of freedom, inaccessibility to the normal sexual object...which cause the origin of perversions in individuals who might have otherwise remained normal" (41).. Nina's inner sexual desire, coupled with her mother's restriction of her sexual freedom and Thomas' urging to release her sexual inhibitions causes Nina to become the hysteric. She is being pulled in two opposite directions by people who have a large amount of influence over Nina and her life. So, according to Freud, the symptoms of hysteria will manifest themselves in Nina's sexual activities; the first being masturbation.

Nina, following Thomas' orders, wakes up one morning and begins to touch herself. As she's lying in bed, she slowly moves her hand under the covers. At first she doesn't know what to think, whether she likes it or not, then she takes a small gasp and

closes her eyes. She's beginning to enjoy it. As Nina gets more and more caught up in the moment, it seems as if she's close to orgasm; then, she looks over to her left only to see her mother asleep in a chair in Nina's room. Even in Nina's fantasy and autoerotic life, her mother is there to repress and stifle her sexual desires. This just goes to show the omnipresence of her mother's power over Nina's sexuality.

The push and pull of Erica and Thomas' influences over Nina causes a psychic split; Nina is at once herself and yet another Self, one that embodies her "black swan". The next time Nina attempts to masturbate, she is in the bathtub alone. She begins touching herself and enjoying it. She takes a breath, closes her eyes and goes under the water; upon opening her eyes, she hallucinates her "black swan self" looking down at her from above. Each time Nina has been on the verge of orgasm, or releasing her repressed sexuality, she is stopped by something; this time, it was a hallucination of her divided Self.

When Nina opens her eyes to see herself staring back, she quickly sits up, out of breath and terrified; this gives us the sense that Nina is genuinely scared of what is inside of her and scared of releasing these desires she has repressed for so long. It is in this scene that we are truly presented with Nina's increasingly tenuous grasp on reality; from now on, the spectator is unsure if we are seeing Nina's subjective reality or a concrete reality. In several scenes, Nina's reflection is moving independently of her own; sometimes it continues moving after she stops and in one instance, the reflection smiles back at her while cutting her finger. The film begins slipping between hallucinations and real life, which allows for the identities of Nina, the good Nina and the bad Nina, and

Lily to constantly be conflated through the use of the doppelganger motif. In Freudian terms, the doppelganger represents the hidden or repressed aspects of the protagonist which the protagonist must acknowledge and confront. In film, doppelgangers are often signaled by reflections or by the use of a physically similar character; both of which are present in *Black Swan*.

There are several scenes where Nina, and also the spectator, mistakes Lily for herself. For Nina, Lily comes to embody the black swan, and while Nina has a version of her own self that is the black swan, she projects these feelings onto Lily because it offers her an external manifestation of Nina's "dark self". Lily represents sexual liberation, freedom, darkness, and impulsivity, everything Nina believes she needs in order to succeed as the black swan.

Interestingly, Freud also says that "In all neurotics...we find feelings of inversion in the unconscious psychic life, fixation of libido on persons of the same sex" (38). Nina's hysterical symptoms partially manifest themselves in her sexual attraction and her sexual experience with Lily. The conflation between good/bad Nina and Lily reaches its apex in the scene where they enter Nina's apartment after a night of drinking and drugs. When the two women enter the apartment, they are both clearly visible to the spectator; but, when Nina's mother enters, we see a shot of a segmented mirror, where in the reflection, Lily splits away from Nina. Lily is apparently standing in the hall while Nina has a drunken confrontation with her mother; yet, Nina and Lily are never shown in the same shot and Erica makes no reference to Lily being present. Again, the spectator is

presented with the slippage of fantasy and reality; there is no way to tell whether this is Nina's subjective reality, or if it is concrete.

The confrontation between Erica and Nina escalates and Nina takes off running down the hallway toward her room. The camera follows both Nina and Lily down the hallway as they run into Nina's room and shut the door. Nina and her mother are yelling viciously at one another while Lily is behind Nina with her hands on her shoulders; this is reminiscent of the devil being on one's shoulder. If Lily represents freedom, and sexual liberation, then this shot is set up to look like Lily is the voice telling Nina to rebel.

Nina looks at Lily, quickly walks across the room and they immediately embrace each other and begin kissing urgently. They begin undressing each other and even their underwear is a glaring metaphor of the good/bad dichotomy—Nina's underwear is very simple and child-like, Lily's is sexy and black, complete with a garter belt. Lily proceeds to go down on Nina, during which Nina looks down and sees her own face rather than Lily's. Lily tells her to relax, and they continue, Nina finally comes to orgasm, presumably the first time ever. Afterwards, Nina once again sees her own self physically present instead of Lily. This entire scene, with its slippage between fantasy and reality can be read different ways; but, it should not be read in a way that situates Nina within a lesbian positionality nor should it be cited as the reason for her neuroses.

The psychoanalytic pathologizing of non-heterosexual sexualities is not new, and certain not only contained in cinematic representations. Coffman states;

Our contemporary understanding of sexuality and the psyche was strongly influenced by, though not coextensive with, the rise of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the century: it played a key role in putting the concept of

psychosexual identity into discourse and publicizing evidence of the presence of non-heterosexuals. (8)

Contemporary popular understandings of sexuality then are culturally tied to psychoanalytic understandings of sexuality that emerged in the twentieth century. These psychoanalytic mythologies still permeate our cultural and social understandings of sexuality which allows psychoanalytically based films like *Black Swan* to be culturally intelligible. If we take as an absolute truth the proposition that Nina's psychosis stems from inarticulable desire for another woman, if we place the origins of hysteria within Nina's psychical interiority, then we claim that the 'knowable truth' of Nina is placed squarely in her sexuality. If we apotheosize Nina's psychosexual development as *the* viable path to what she 'actually' is then we run the risk of pathologizing Nina's actions and experiences without critically questioning them, thus foreclosing on productive opportunities for spectatorial disidentification.

The confrontation with Nina's doppelganger happens during the opening night of Swan Lake. Nina makes it to the ballet just in time, only to find that Thomas has told Lily that she will be dancing the part of the Swan Queen in place of Nina. Nina refuses to let this happen and tells Thomas that she will be dancing the part no matter what. She enters her dressing room and sits down at the vanity; the audience sees Nina and her reflection as she puts on her Swan Queen makeup. Thomas follows her in, leans over her shoulder and says "The only person standing in your way is you. It's time to let her go. Lose yourself." Here, Thomas unknowingly makes reference to the fact that there are two Ninas, and in doing so, he gives the audience a glimpse of what is to come.

Nina heads to the stage to make her entrance as the White Swan; she peeks out of the curtain to see that she will be dancing to a packed house, and she's so nervous that she forgets her stage directions. As she finds her place, she watches the ballet corps begin and once again hallucinating, Nina sees her face on all of the other ballerinas. Shaken up, Nina falls while she's dancing the White Swan. Thomas is furious, Nina is devastated; everything she was afraid of was coming true, she was not going to be perfect. Nina leaves the stage and rushes down the stairs to her dressing room to calm down and change costumes for the Black Swan.

Upon her entrance into the dressing room, she sees Lily sitting at the vanity putting on the Black swan makeup. The camera frames Lily's reflection as she is talking to Nina and as Lily begins to turn around, the camera pans and we see that not Lily, but Nina is sitting at the vanity. This is the first time in the film that we see Nina actually confront the existence of her doppelganger. Previously in the film, when Nina sees her "dark self" it is only briefly in fleeting glimpses, they never talk to one another. This is also the first time that we see the white and the black swan Nina—before, the comparison between the 'bad' Nina/black swan and 'good' Nina/white swan was only symbolic, now it is explicit.

A physical altercation ensues in which white swan Nina slams black swan Nina into a mirror, shattering it into pieces; this is symbolic of the breakdown of the psychic barrier between 'good'/'bad' Nina. The struggle continues between the two Ninas—the black swan reaches for the white swan's neck and begins strangling her while repeatedly yelling "It's my turn!" White swan Nina grabs a shard of broken mirror and stabs black

swan Nina in the side. The camera then shows white swan Nina, with red eyes aggressively proclaiming “It’s *my* turn.” After ‘good’ Nina has stabbed what she thought was her ‘bad’ alter ego, the audience is shown that it was not really Nina at all, but Lily who was stabbed. Again, the audience experiences the same slippages between reality and fantasy as Nina. Frightened, Nina drops the shard of mirror and hears the stage manager say that it is almost time to start. Nina is confused and scared, she does not know what to do with the dead body of Lily; in a hurry, Nina stashes the body in the bathroom.

The fact that Nina slams her alter-ego into the mirror and shattering it is very telling. No longer is Nina’s alter-ego an idealized image she sees but can never fully achieve. Throughout the film, Nina has wanted to be what she saw in the mirror; the mirror-image was everything she was not and was perfect for the role of the Black Swan. When the mirror shatters, the barriers are broken down between Nina and her alter-ego, allowing the alter-ego to actually take complete control. Nina has fully followed the advice Thomas related before the show: “The only person standing in your way is you. It’s time to let her go. Lose yourself.” The fact that it is ambiguous as to whether or not it was Nina or Lily who was stabbed is not of the most importance here, because Lily served as the physical embodiment of Nina’s alter-ego.

In the following scene, it is time for the ‘new’ Nina to dance the black swan. As she hears the music that cues black swan’s coda, Nina looks down at her arms to find that feathers are beginning to grow; she smiles, knowingly accepting that she is transforming into the Black Swan. As Nina begins her fouettés, the feathers on her arms are becoming

more and more pronounced with every turn, it is obvious now that her arms are transforming into wings. Finally, when Nina finishes, the camera shows a long shot of Nina, her arms are not in reality wings; but, the giant shadow on the back of the stage shows Nina with enormous swan wings. Not only has Nina psychically transformed into the mentality of the black swan; but, she also envisions herself physically transforming into an Other. Again, the cinematic technique here works to confuse the viewer as to what is reality; feathers and wings are visible, then they are not, Nina has red swan-like eyes, and then she doesn't. The audience does not know when we are inside of Nina's head or when we are viewing the situation at hand objectively; but, isn't that one of the horrifying aspects of being insane—not being able to differentiate between objective and subjective reality?

After Nina has finished the coda, she goes back down in her dressing room to take care of Lily's body. There is blood seeping out from under the bathroom door, and Nina places a towel over it to soak up the mess while she prepares for the final act of the ballet. As Nina is finishing up her white swan makeup, she hears a knock at the door; upon opening it, she sees Lily staring right back at her, alive. Nina slowly turns, completely disoriented, surveying the dressing room to see that the mirror actually is broken. She goes over to the bathroom only to find that there is no blood, and there is no body hidden inside. Utterly confused, she begins to tear up, she reaches down only to find that rather than stabbing her alter-ego, or Lily, she has in fact stabbed herself.

Nina sits down at the vanity, crying, the audience sees the expression on her face as she comes to the realization that she has lost her mind. Determined to finish her role as

the Swan Queen, Nina proceeds to finish her makeup in order to take the stage for the last scene. Nina dances the final scene perfectly. She dances up to the top of the cliff on set, looks dramatically out into the audience and makes eye contact with her mother. Then, Nina jumps off the cliff onto a mattress, and as Thomas comes over to congratulate her on a wonderful performance, he sees her bleeding wound. Nina's last words are "I felt it. Perfect. It was perfect." as the lights glare and the film goes to white while the crowd chants "Nina! Nina!" Like the majority of the film, there is no certainty as to whether Nina dies at the end, it can be interpreted in a number of ways. Again, like most of the film, this uncertainty, ambiguity, and refusal to be clear lends itself to various, and sometimes even conflicting, readings.

While psychoanalysis as an interrogative tool should not be wholly dismissed, it is important to persist in reading against *Black Swan*'s psychoanalytic narrative because "...not only is psychoanalysis required to provide a secured meta-language, but...it is also inseparable from the material it is being used to analyze" (Schneider, 182). Meaning, if we use only psychoanalysis as a deconstructive tool, we will continually discover the interpretation the film itself is already organized around (Schneider, 183). Another problematic aspect of relying solely on psychoanalysis to analyze *Black Swan* is that "...psychoanalytic readings in film theory tend toward the ahistorical inasmuch as the psychic structures discerned within a given film are taken to be operative independently of either the spectators' or the film's historical circumstances (Schneider, 182).

Therefore, if we were to psychoanalyze Nina's psychosis and the film's effect on the

spectator, they would have to exist in “an eternal present determined by the unchanging structures of patriarchy” with no regard to historical or social circumstances.

Here it is important to resist pathologizing Nina’s sexual behaviors because doing so results in dichotomizing this cinematic representation into a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ representation rather than looking at the nuances of this representation and what it holds for the spectator. It is important not to label Nina as a lesbian simply because she had a same-gender ‘fantasy’ and it is equally important, though, to not say she is completely heterosexual. Nina’s sexual vacillation and fluidity is important; perhaps her sexual endeavors are, like Freud says, a manifestation of her hysteria. If so, this offers a subversive opportunity for disidentification.

While one can assume hysteria and the descent into insanity are never something one would desire, through disidentification, the queer spectator can rework the figure of the hysteric and find it productive after all. The female hysteric is an interesting figure, in that she is always already doubly invisible and doubly marginalized—to define a woman as insane is to even further render her invisible and further exclude her from any semblance of agency. Yet, the hystericism of Nina can be viewed as an act of failure, therefore an act of resistance. The argument that hysteria can actually be a point of empowerment is not a new one; in writing on madness and literature, Anderson states, “Denied all manner of self-expression, otherwise-intelligent women may have unknowingly resorted to hysteria as their only mode of self-expression. Feminist critics have most often read “madness, whenever it appears in women’s texts, as a willed choice

and a preferable alternative to sanity for women” (Caminero-Santangelo, 1, in Anderson, 64).

However, my argument is not that hysteria offers empowerment to women; very few times, I’m sure, is insanity a willful choice. Insanity and complete loss of a coherent idea of one’s self are rarely the choice of the individual that experiences them. This is the horror of *Black Swan*; even if you know you are going insane, there’s nothing you can do about it. I also am not arguing that real mental health issues are a point of resistance, and critically analyzing that is entirely out of the scope of this project. However, the character of Nina and this particular cinematic representation of hysteria can most certainly be a point of resistance. Looking at Nina through a queer spectator perspective, the fact that she is deemed ‘insane’ because she is outside the bounds of normality is something very important. Nina presents us with a main character who fails, who goes insane, who is definitely not normal, and who dies at the end—Nina’s story is not a fairy tale full of happy endings. We are told that it is bad when there are not happy endings, we are programmed to expect and to desire the ‘happy ending’; which presumably means romantic love, family, money, material goods, etc. But, what is wrong with cinematically representing something other than a happy ending? Life is full of them.

Through Nina’s failure, we are able to imagine otherwise. We should name failure not as the negative space opened up by normalized modes of success, but as a habitable space with its own logic and practices. Queerness is always a failure; a failure to conform and a failure to fit in. As Halberstam states, “To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to do; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the

queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, [and] the embrace of the absurd...Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us revel in an cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures” (Halberstam, 186-7).

Rather than apologizing for our failures, we should embrace them; allow them to help us imagine alternative worlds that exist outside of the conventions of production, intimacy, and leisure. Nina may not represent ‘happiness’ and she may not be a ‘positive’ representation of female sexuality. More importantly, though, she ultimately allows us to interrogate a variety of ideas and structures. She makes us question happiness, what it entails, who can have it, and if it looks the same for everyone. She allows us to envision a world where ‘perfection’ is achieved through failure to live a ‘sane’, ‘normal’, life. While Nina may not be queer in some senses, she is certainly queer in her failures; and sometimes, it is refreshing to see someone else who also just can’t seem to get it right.

CHAPTER III

QUEER POSSIBILITIES: DISIDENTIFYING WITH
THE FAMILY IN *THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT*

The Kids Are All Right follows the tenuous relationships of a nuclear family with a lesbian twist; Nic (Annette Bening) is the ‘man’ of the house, the breadwinner who takes care of her flaky slightly-femme wife, Jules (Julianne Moore) and their two kids Laser (Josh Hutcherson) and Joni (Mia Wasikowska). The story follows the difficulties of Nic and Jules’ long-term, committed relationship; Nic is a workaholic/alcoholic and Jules feels neglected and unappreciated. When Laser and Joni seek out their anonymous sperm donor dad, the already fragile family dynamics become even more strained.

The Kids Are All Right was released in the summer of 2010 and immediately critically acclaimed, being nominated for a total of four Academy Awards including Best Picture and Original Screenplay. Critical praise for the film is mostly positive, calling it “...so canny in its insights and so agile in its negotiation of complex emotions that it deserves to stand on its own” and “...probing, poignant, and above all, highly entertaining”. The film has been called one “...about basic things, about the meaning of family and the vulnerability of families...”¹ *The Kids Are All Right* is so ‘universal’ in its subject matter that Roger Ebert refuses to “call it a ‘gay film.’”² He goes on to say that he “...toyed with the idea of not even using the word “lesbian” and leaving it to [the viewer]

¹ <http://www.sfgate.com/movies/article/Review-The-Kids-Are-All-Right-3259207.php>

² <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-kids-are-all-right-2010>

to figure out that the couple was female.” Kay Shackleton says “...it is a film more about families and love than it is about sexual orientation.”

The consensus of mainstream film reviewers seems to be that *The Kids Are All Right* is a film that transcends sexual orientation and gender identity and gets at what is ‘really’ important: family. However, while this film has certainly received its fair share of attention in the form of critical accolades, it has also received attention in the form of fiercely critical analysis. Much of the critical concern about this film comes from queer academics and centers around fact that it depicts a self-identified lesbian couple ‘replicating’ a heteronormative family structure, the not-so-subtle racism, cartoonish depiction of what lesbians ‘look’ like, as well as its representation of lesbian relationships as passionless and sexless.

Suzanna Walters, critiques the representation of lesbian sexuality and gay kinship structures in *The Kids Are All Right* in “The kids are all right but the lesbians aren’t: Queer kinship in US culture.” She argues that the representation of this lesbian couple is essentially heterosexual through its assertion of a generic, “universal” love story (923). Walters believes that the universality of this film results in “a de-gayng of gayness; the reliance on heteronormative gender paradigms so that the women are depicted as – really – just like our neighbors down the street where daddy goes out to work and mommy stays at home; the invisibility of lesbian culture and lesbian friends” (926). She goes on to argue that while there are some mainstream television shows in which gay families are represented to be complex and dynamic, the majority of the representations are still very much lacking, especially *The Kids Are All Right*. Walters goes on to say that “[a] more

prosaic and multilayered queer politics should be part of the context of these familial images instead of the sterile world of deracinated lesbian suburbanites we see in *The Kids Are All Right*" (930). Ultimately, Walters wants to see mainstream media representations of radically different families in ways that disrupt "heterosexist business as usual and provide a template for imagining kinship in the future tense" (930).

While Walters' critique is insightful in some aspects, it presupposes that there is a 'real' gayness and a 'real' heterosexuality which one can achieve; in order to "de-gay gayness," there must first be a cohesive, concrete gayness for which to "de-gay." She also argues that the familial images presented in *The Kids Are All Right* are of "...the sterile world of deracinated lesbian suburbanites"; which assumes that deracinated lesbians that live in suburbia are somehow less queer than the quintessential queerness or not properly queer.

Gardener also sees the portrayal of this lesbian couple as a negative and problematic representation of lesbian parents and queer families. To Gardener, *The Kids Are All Right* falls short of redefining queer families for mainstream (heterosexual) audiences and says that:

There already exists an abundance of negative cultural representations of lesbians. As such, there is a desperate, political need for positive examples of queer families that might work to destabilize current stereotypes about lesbians (181).

While Gardener's analysis is not focused specifically on *The Kids Are All Right*, they use it as an exemplar of the way they see lesbian families portrayed negatively in contemporary American society (181).

Lisa Duggan's scathing review¹ includes such adjectives as 'vile', 'horrifying', 'repulsive', and 'offensive.' She cites her revulsion mainly due to the lesbian 'caricatures' of Nic and Jules. She argues that the gestures, expressions, and movements of the two actresses were obviously manufactured in order to make them look "dykey", ultimately calling the film a "dyke-face minstrel show." In regards to the film's representation of Nic and Jules' sex life, Duggan unabashedly declares "If that's what I thought I had to look forward to, I'd exit lesbiana and start sucking dick tomorrow."

What is problematic about these reviews of *The Kids Are All Right* is that in categorizing this representation of lesbians as 'negative' or 'bad', they are implicitly suggesting that in order to count as 'positive', these images must live up to some unspoken idea of 'true' queerness or lesbianism. Films that contain lesbians or queer characters are generally gauged on their positivity, meaning their ability to reflect as opposed to distort the reality of queer life; but, whose life constitutes the reality? In the attempt to cast certain films as negative representations is inherent the act of delimiting cinematic desire; "For one thing, it refuses to allow for the plethora of queer identifications made by viewers who look to see their desires reflected in a multiplicity of situations, however incongruous or at odds with an established political and social identity" (Whatling, 85). Just because a film does not accurately reflect a viewer's politics does not mean that the film itself is bad or that the viewer is remiss in finding pleasure in the film.

¹ <http://web.archive.org/web/20120315083529/http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/07/30/only-the-kids-are-all-right/>

As Whatling states, when it comes to films that depict queer and lesbian sexualities there is a “...demand that cinematic images represent the variety of lesbian life, that the complexity of lesbian existence can be reflected to the same degree as the complexity of heterosexuality is reflected on screen” (83). Often in the demands for more ‘complex’ lesbian or queer cinematic images, complex seems to mean healthy, happy, productive, and stable. Yet, as Dyer reminds us, representations will never be able to adequately portray reality, for the images on screen are representations of a particular representation of reality—there is no unmediated access to reality (3). So, because people make sense of cinematic images in a variety of different ways according to and mediated through their life experiences, films like *The Kids Are All Right* certainly cannot be judged as empirically ‘negative’.

These reviews all level essentially the same critique: Not Queer Enough. Nic and Jules are too ‘andro dyke’ and ‘manufactured’ to represent a ‘real’ lesbian and their non-existent sex life also just cannot be representative of the Lesbian Reality. The question of whether or not something is ‘queer enough’ is indeed problematic in itself; to play exclusionary politics by judging images according to a standard of queerness in which ‘real’ queerness is achieved through a specific outward appearance is not productive. To have a queer blueprint in order to determine what and what does not, who and who does not fulfill the requirements is counterintuitive to queerness as an idea of constant contestation and flux. What are the gestures and movements of a ‘real’ lesbian and how does one ‘look’ like a lesbian? To deride Bening and Moore for not adequately portraying ‘real’ lesbians assumes that there is a particular truth in the way lesbians look and act—

but where is the cut off and who gets to decide? Calling attention to Nic's and Jules' lack of sex life also assumes that having a healthy sex life with another woman is essential to the reality of being a lesbian, which necessarily excludes any other articulation of sexuality, including those women who may not find sex pleasurable.²

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says that "... 'gay' and 'lesbian' still present themselves (however exclusively) as objective, empirical categories governed by empirical rules of evidence (however contested). 'Queer' seems to hinge much more radically and explicitly on a person's undertaking particular, performative acts of experimental self-perception and filiation" (9). Sedgwick sees 'queer' as a term that in many important instances, can signify only when attached to the first person; that is, only an *individual* can decide whether or not they themselves are definitively queer. While filmic representations cannot necessarily speak for themselves in the sense that Sedgwick means, this idea nonetheless reminds us to be mindful to not police the boundaries of queerness. It urges us to avoid reifying 'queer' into a monolithic category that, like 'gay' and 'lesbian', presents itself as objective, empirical category that is governed by rules of evidence.

The critiques that dismiss this film because it is not queer enough or because it does not accurately represent an authentically queer reality rely on the same uncritical, totalizing logic as those reviews that elide the aspect of sexuality all together; both stances seek to simplify the representation at hand. My project is not to claim this representation as queer or as positive—it is simply to push for broader and more complex understandings of filmic representations of sexuality. In idealizing certain representations

² Gupta, Picturing space for lesbian nonsexualities.

as accurately and positively queer, new forms of hierarchy based on exclusion occur; therefore, it is necessary to read this film, or any film, in a way that opens up spaces for possibility without dictating which kinds of possibilities can and should be realized (Butler, viii).

To argue for a viewer positionality grounded in the idea of ‘queer’ as resisting any coherent categorical definition could seem apolitical. Leo Bersani argues that in the midst of the intellectual project of “denaturalizing the epistemic and political regimes that have constructed us,” we have in fact only erased ourselves (4). By evoking the term ‘ourselves’ Bersani is referring to individuals who identify under the specificities of stable gay and lesbian identities which he believes can be used as political rallying points. Bersani believes the consequence of highlighting the social constructedness of these identity categories is self-erasure. While these identity categories function as political rallying points, they “...tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (Butler, 354). Meaning, these identities can be used for political means, but to what end and for whose politics? Which version of gay and lesbian is to be valorized and which versions will be excluded because of it?

Arguing for a queer reading of film that resists viewing it through any one identity category does not erase the specificities of ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’, but creates space for new ways to think about sexualities and identities in “...a complex social ecology where the presence of different genders, different identities and identifications, will be taken as a given” (Sedgwick, xiii). This way of viewing film enables the imagining of new

possibilities; and while some may not see it as politically valuable, let us keep in mind that “...no political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real” (Butler, xxiv).

Because I am advocating this film not be dismissed as wholly negative, neither am I saying that it is without flaw. Yes, there are most certainly problematic aspects in this film; the treatment and fungibility of people of color, the fact that Nic and Jules are not placed within any sort of queer community context, that Nic and Jules are a white, upper-middle class lesbian married couple with enough wealth to have two children from artificial insemination, and even more wealth so that one of the mothers can stay home and raise the children without holding a steady job (in Los Angeles). They are unapologetically privileged in almost every aspect. Yet, to dismiss this film based solely on the problematic aspects is to completely miss the queer potential it holds. In order for a film to be productive, every shot, every line does not have to come together to create a gestalt of politically correct perfection. The most valuable way to analyze this film is through disidentifying with it by critically interrogating the problematic aspects while engaging the queer potentialities.

While the critical reviews of *The Kids Are All Right* all offer valid readings and make good points about the film, my views are more in line with Jack Halberstam. He does believe the film “...is depressing and sadly trades stale stereotypes about lesbians in particular”³ yet, he also notes a particularly interesting quality, “If I learned anything from Cholodenko’s film, it is that trading in sex for comfort, change for stability, and

³ <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/07/15/the-kids-arent-alright/>

improvised relationships for marriage are all bad deals and if we don't change the social structures we inherit, we are doomed to repeat them.”

While useful in order to think about the failure to live up to the social structures we inherit, Halberstam's critique of the film elides an important consideration of failure as a political tool—there is a difference between failures that can be chosen and ones that cannot. Certain individuals do not have the option of trading in sex for comfort, change for stability, and improvised relationships for marriage; and for some people, excitement, change, and spontaneity are not feasible ways of living. Yet one of the points Halberstam makes here is that the ‘negative’ depiction of this lesbian family raises the question that maybe the individuals in this family are not the cause for its failure; maybe the problem is the institution and the *idea* of family itself. Even a film with problematic aspects can be useful inasmuch as it provides an opportunity to critically think through certain issues and engage in productive critiques.

I do agree that the family structure depicted in this film relies on heteronormative patterns of gender and family ideals; which is exactly why I think the ‘failure’ of this family is important. It is important to recognize the ways that “...heterosexual norms reappear within gay identities, to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are not only structured in part by dominant heterosexual frame, but that they are *not* for that reason *determined* by them” (Butler, 362). Because Nic and Jules are implicated in heterosexuality through their familial structure and gender presentations does not mean they are emulating heterosexuality. It is also important to note that gay identities being implicated in heterosexuality is not the same as those identities being derived from

heterosexuality, "...and it is not the same as claiming that that heterosexuality is the only cultural network in which they are implicated" (Butler, 362). Because Nic and Jules imitate a heterosexual familial structure, they are able to resignify "precisely those heterosexual structures that would consign gay life to discursive domains of unreality and unthinkability" (Butler, 362), and in doing so, expose heterosexuality as an imitation of an imitation. When heterosexual constructs appear in gay and lesbian identities, rather than being simply mimicry of straightness, they are in fact a commentary on the naturalized position of straightness, bringing into relief the constructed status of the titular original (Butler, 363).

There is most certainly a presence of heterosexual norms within not only the family structure in *The Kids Are All Right*, but also within the construction of Nic's and Jules' gender identities. Nic and Jules are raising their nuclear family in suburban Los Angeles, where Nic is a successful doctor and Jules is the stay-at-home mom. The more masculine mom is the breadwinner, the more feminine one takes care of the home and the two kids, a boy and a girl. Even Nic's personality represents the heterosexual ideal of masculinity: she is rational, strict, serious, focused on work, and cares a lot about the presentation of a 'perfect' family. Jules however, is the flighty, indecisive, lax, aging hippie mom that always insists on talking about the feelings and emotions of her children and partner.

The presence of heteronormative constructs in this family, upon first glance, makes it seem as though this lesbian couple is simply copying heterosexual family ideals and norms. Because of this, one could assume this family's failure is due to the fact that

lesbians are trying to appropriate a heterosexual family structure to fit their ‘alternative’ lifestyle. The reason it is easy to deduce these things about the representation of this particular family is, as Butler explains, because “Compulsory heterosexuality sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic; the norm that determines the real implies that “being” lesbian is always a kind of miming, a vain effort to participate in the phantasmatic plentitude of naturalized heterosexuality which will always and only fail” (360).

Heterosexuality, then, posits itself as the normal, the default, the natural sexuality and everything that falls outside of heterosexuality is nothing but a copy. Yet, as Butler argues, heterosexuality is only an approximation of the ideal of itself; “...the “reality” of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing” (361).

If the reality of heterosexuality is only an approximation of an impossible ideal, then when non-heterosexual cultures imitate it, it is always “...an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original” (Butler, 362). Therefore, the ‘appropriation’ of heterosexual constructs by a non-heterosexual individual—or in this case family—serves to expose the fact that heterosexuality is itself nothing more than an imitation of itself. The presence of heterosexual constructs within queer identities assumes that there is a queer imitation or repetition of straightness that only serves to highlight the constructedness of the ‘original’:

That parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original, but it shows that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition. (Butler, 362)

It is possible to read the film in a way that shows when Nic's and Jules' attempt to 'imitate' heterosexual familial constructs, through their failure, they expose the heterosexual idea of 'family' itself as an approximation of an ideal that can never be achieved. Ultimately, everyone's gender and sexuality, as well as the norms and constructs that follow, are fabricated and contingent and must be constantly repeated because they never quite accomplish the ideal. By keeping in mind the constructedness of gender, sexuality, and social norms, this reading of *The Kids Are All Right* offers an alternative to previous readings that find it an inauthentic representation of lesbian or queer sexuality. In acknowledging that there is no 'real' queerness which this film is attempting to approximate, the insights into the film can be productive beyond 'queer enough' critiques.

Because Nic and Jules fail in their approximation of heterosexual family ideals, we must ask, why? Maybe the failure here is not of lesbians trying to appropriate heteronormative family structures; maybe it's the failure of all families, the institution of family. If no one can live up to the ideal of family regardless of their sexual identity, maybe the current notion of "family" has run its course. Maybe rather than blame the members of the family for failing or talk about the trials that all families experience or the problems that come along with long-term committed relationships we need to reconceive of what a family means and what it entails. Perhaps the moral of the story is that family

and long-term monogamous relationships function as a cage, smothering one's passion and future. While this film is certainly very problematic in many respects, through the failure of the family, we are forced to think what constitutes a 'real' family and able to think of other possible family configurations that could have potentially worked. The film itself does not suggest these avenues to alternative family constructions; but, through disidentification, the queer spectator is able to imagine different configurations.

Perhaps, if it weren't for the illicit affair between Jules and Paul, this family could have been reconfigured as existing with a donor dad and two moms, all being fully involved in the children's lives. Or perhaps, illicit affair included, if Nic reacted differently, could this not have worked with the donor dad being in a sexual relationship with the moms? These are hypothetical situations, and while the film does not present these options, a queer spectator can read into certain queer moments throughout the film that allow for imagining of alternative structures of relationships and families.

Alexander Doty uses the term 'queer moment' to name those instances in all texts, even in heterocentrist texts, that "describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transsexual, and straight queerness" (2). A queer moment is an instance in a text that can "... be described as moments of narrative disruption which destabilize heteronormativity, and the meanings and identities it engenders, by bringing to light all that is disavowed by, and yet integral to, heteronormative logic" (Sullivan, 191). Queer moments are the spaces where disidentification can be actualized; they can be thought of as those elements in a text, those fleeting occurrences where the spectator catches a glimpse of something queer

which allows them to articulate their own histories, presents, and futures in that text. It allows them to read themselves into that moment, even if the text itself does not offer this reading as an option. It's a way of thinking beyond what is presented to us in the film text and allow the viewer to construct their own narrative future. Reading the film this way, by highlighting and analyzing these queer moments, the possibilities of the film are expanded rather than constricted.

One of the queerest moments in the film is when Nic and Jules are attempting to have sex while they're watching gay male porn. This sex scene leaves much to be desired; it's not sexy in the slightest, there's no passion, only vague boredom, and the scene ends in a slapstick comedy-esque performance of the two scrambling for the remote control in order to turn the volume down. While the scene is most definitely lacking in sex appeal, it also does something interesting; it shows two lesbians having sex to gay male porn, which is presumably a typical event for the two of them.

This interesting detail of Nic and Jules' relationship continues later in the film when Laser and his friend Clay are snooping around in Nic and Jules' bedroom and they find a DVD hidden in a drawer. Clay immediately assumes that it's porn, and the assumption is that since the Moms are lesbian, they would only take pleasure in pornography that featured lesbians. Clay is beyond excited and tells Laser that they're watching it. Laser, although hesitant, capitulates and follows Clay to watch the DVD. The next scene shows Laser and Clay sitting in front of a computer watching the DVD, which, to the boys' dismay, is gay male porn. The computer shows an image of a shirtless male with a police helmet on, playing with his nipples and dancing to a cheesy,

quintessential 1970s porn soundtrack. Laser and Clay are completely confused: “Do you think the whole thing’s like this...Maybe we should fast forward.” They are confused by the fact that two lesbians would have a pornography DVD depicting anything other than lesbian sex; because, of course, self-identified lesbians cannot be sexually attracted or aroused by anything besides other lesbians.

Next, we see Jules pull up to the house. She walks into Laser’s room only to find Clay and him watching gay male porn; they’re still confused and now so is Jules. In the following scene, Jules and Nic sit Laser down for a “talk.” Laser thinks this talk is about punishment for going through Jules and Nic’s room, while Nic and Jules have initiated the talk because they have an inclination that Laser may be gay. Jules asks Laser if there is anything he wants to tell them, and he says no, but he does have a question. Nic and Jules think, of course, the question is going to be something about Laser being sexually attracted to Clay. It turns out he asks them, “Why do you guys watch gay man porn?” They obviously were not expecting this to be the question; but, Jules decides to field it anyway. Her response is “Well, sweetie, you know, human sexuality is complicated. And sometimes desire can be, you know, counterintuitive. You know, for example, because women’s sexual responsiveness is internalized, sometimes it’s exciting for us to see responsiveness externalized, like with a...Like with a penis.” Laser asks why they do not prefer to watch “girls doing it” and Jules answers that in ‘lesbian’ pornography they usually hire straight women to pretend and “the inauthenticity is just unbearable.”

The first queer element here would be the fact that two straight-identifying boys are watching gay male porn—while it’s arguable that they took pleasure in it, they must

have taken a certain amount of pleasure in watching it or they would not have sat there and watched as long as they did. Most importantly though, is the fact that two self-identifying lesbians choose to watch gay male porn. I'm not sure of the validity of the film's pop-pseudo-psychoanalytic explanation of the reason why they watch gay male porn, because if anything, desire is by definition intuitive; but, the film does show some subversive qualities in this respect.

Rather than delineate the boundaries of what is and is not a lesbian, this film expands them; it offers up a self-identified lesbian who is aroused by gay male porn, has a sexual relationship with a man, and in the end (or, all along) is still a lesbian. The film is being self-referential when Jules says that human sexuality is complicated—the film proceeds to show certain ways in which human sexuality is not a static category. *The Kids Are All Right* shows an individual whose sexuality's qualifiers seemingly prohibit pleasure from sex with the opposite gender, as well as pleasure from watching two men have sex—in order to “be” a “real” lesbian, presumably one should only have interest in the same gender. Rather than policing the borders of lesbianism, *The Kids Are All Right* works to expand them by asking the question, what constitutes a lesbian?

In questioning what acts constitute an authentic lesbian, *The Kids Are All Right* presents a sexual identity that is uncoupled from an individual's sexual practices. Lesbianism is often taken to be characterized by sexual practices that are oriented toward a single partner of the same gender and that this identity will not change over time (Sedgwick, 8). The film challenges this assumption by presenting the viewer with a self-identified lesbian who does not, at least within the confines of the filmic text, have sex

with her same-gender wife, yet who does have sex with the opposite gender several times, and finds it pleasurable. We are able to imagine what a lesbian identity looks like that does not place same-gender sex at its center, which certainly is a reminder of the provisionality, contingency, and instability of identity categories.

Jules is “still” a lesbian even after she has sex with a man, and she has, throughout the course of the film, understood herself as a lesbian. After her affair with Paul comes out, Nic asks her, “Are you straight now?” Emphatically, Jules responds, “No. It has nothing to do with that!” When Jules has a phone conversation with Paul about the affair not being a secret anymore, Paul suggests that he and Jules continue the relationship and become a couple. Jules thinks his idea is ludicrous, leaving Nic and starting a relationship with Paul was never in her plans. While Paul continues to babble on about how they can be together, she’s had enough of trying to talk over him and finally shouts “I’m gay!”

Jules never thinks of herself as anything other than a lesbian the entire time she’s having an affair with Paul; the second time Jules and Paul have sex, she asks him afterward, “God. Do you think I’m some sad-sack, middle-aged lesbian?” The fact that Jules still self-identifies as a lesbian even as she’s lying in bed naked beside a man with whom she’s just had sex is extremely important. Jules does not have to explain to Laser, or the audience, the complexities of human sexuality; she shows us throughout the course of the film. The film never questions Jules’ sexuality or sexual orientation—it is a given fact that she is a lesbian, even though she has sex with a man. The film never portrays Jules’ extra-marital affair as an internal conflict about her sexual identity and because it

does not work to place the viewer in a position of judgment, it works against policing the boundaries of who counts as a lesbian. The film raises the question that maybe sexual orientation is not all about who you have sex with. Rather than seeing this aspect of *The Kids Are All Right* as a negative portrayal of lesbian sexuality, the audience can disidentify with it in order to expand the horizons of what can be considered ‘lesbian’; “Disidentification is about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component” (Munoz, 29).

Not only does the film work to push the boundaries of who can be considered a lesbian, it also can be read as pushing the boundaries of what constitutes a family. It’s entirely possible that the family could have entered into a co-parenting agreement and formed a three-parent family. I do not think the film intentionally offers these brief looks into an alternative family structure because it poses as a universal love story about *all* families, i.e. families constructed under the auspices of Western ideas of love and marriage. While the film implicitly shuts down the option of a three-parent family, there are instances in the film where the audience is able to see it as a viable familial structure.

The first instance is the scene in which Nic and Jules meet Paul for the first time. Paul comes over for a casual, cook-out style lunch at Nic’s and Jules’s house. Nic, Jules, Laser, Joni, and Paul all gather around the picnic table outside, eating food and drinking wine, having lighthearted conversation. Nic asks questions about Paul and his life, attempting to get to know him a little better and Paul reciprocates, asking questions about Jules’ work for a living and how the two of them met. The conversation being had is nothing too important, and while the whole event is a little awkward, nothing is out of the

ordinary. In this representation of a quotidian lunch, with unremarkable conversation, the audience is able to see these two separate entities of ‘donor dad’ and ‘family’ become one. In this queer moment, the audience has the potential to read this as a particular construction of family.

The idea of this cohesive family unit presents itself again later in the film when Nic, Jules, and the kids go over to Paul’s house for dinner. Jules, Laser, and Joni are all in the kitchen helping Paul prepare the meal for the evening while Nic sits on the couch going through Paul’s record collection. Next, they are all gathered around the dinner table eating and having conversation. While this dinner is much more familiar and comfortable than the first meeting, it is still excruciatingly awkward at some points; but, then again, when is family not awkward at some points? Nic and Paul find that they have a musical commonality: both love Joni Mitchell. Upon this realization, Paul gives Nic a high five and exclaims “My brother from another mother!”; then they begin singing an a cappella rendition of Joni Mitchell’s “All I Want”. While very awkward, it shows the comfortability, casualness, and ease of the family; we can really imagine that this is a normal occurrence, we can see this family as a three-parent household. As the scene comes to a close, Paul holds up his wine glass to cheers “To an unconventional family.” While this dinner scene does not intentionally serve the purpose of depicting an alternative family structure, the audience can certainly read it that way. This scene in fact serves as the reason Nic finds out about Jules’ affair with Paul—it’s the scene that marks the beginning of what could be a family, but ultimately fails because of infidelity.

What is important though, is that while the narrative of the film did not allow a three-parent familial structure to succeed, the audience saw glimpses of it succeeding. The audience, however briefly, is able to set aside expectations about love, marriage, parenthood, and kinship drawn from prevailing Western theories about family and intimacy and imagine another construction of family (Stacey, 8). Perhaps the reason this family failed is because it was wholly bound up in the American nuclear, heteronormative idea of family, "...one spawned when reciprocal romantic love inspires one man and one woman to exchange vows to forsake all others before they begin inviting visits from the stork" (Stacey, 5).

While the failure of this family and the difficulties Nic and Jules experience in their relationship echo familiar obstacles in heterosexual relationships, "...the gender difference (or similarity) of the usual suspects helps to illuminate, and sometimes to challenge, many otherwise clichéd conventions of gender and sexual practice" (Stacey, 29). That is, when two women attempt heterosexual marriage conventions and fail, it illuminates not the failure of the women, but the failure of the institution. Rather than adhering to the Western ideals of family strictly emanating from two people who are in mutual romantic love, maybe 'family' and 'marriage' should be reconfigured with "...a mature willingness to acknowledge the variety, complexity, fluidity, and sheer mystery of individual sexual longings, limits, aesthetics, and meanings" (Stacey, 47). Rather than unapologetically promoting monogamy for all and demonizing those who slip, we might instead redefine fidelity to "...signify faithfulness to the particular sexual, emotional, and

social commitments that intimates mutually arrive at through honest negotiation and renegotiation” (Stacey, 47).

The point is that there is no normal family; there’s no right or wrong way to be a family. The only problematic way to be a family is through trying to live up to heteronormative ideals of what a family means or should look like when those ideals themselves are broken; “In fact, a family system that insists on hitching eros and domesticity through monogamous marriage is a recipe not for stability but for high rates of adultery and divorce...” (Stacey, 189). We see that they’re broken through Nic and Jules’ failed approximation of these ideals and we also see glimpses of a reconfigured family involving Jules, Nic, and Paul. By seeing two same-gender people perform the daily tasks and obstacles of marriage and family, it makes glaringly obvious the constructs they are trying to play out. When it’s a man and a woman having marriage problems in a film, you don’t ever really see that it’s the problem of the structure of marriage, you just see it’s the problem of one of the people in the marriage—the workings of family and marriage are hidden by the familiarity of those structures. When you see two people ‘pretending’ to follow the form and structure of heterosexual family but they’re not heterosexual, their performance is at once familiar and unfamiliar, it becomes obvious that the whole thing is a social construction—that heterosexuals are trying to approximate impossible ideals, and they are failing too. It’s not the people inhabiting the structure, it’s the structure.

In order for images to be read in terms of the queer moments and potentialities they offer, the images themselves do not necessarily have to be self-referential in their

queerness. Through disidentification, the viewer is able to critically interrogate and rework the problematic aspects of *The Kids Are All Right* while simultaneously locating and enacting productive queer potentialities; and in doing so, are at once able to offer a critique and envision new ways of being.

CHAPTER IV

QUEER FUTURES: IMPLICATIONS OF CINEMA

Films reflect ideas, notions, and feelings of the society in which we live. They make available concepts and ideas that contribute to the ways in which we understand and experience the world. Because films have the ability to structure the way we see the world, subjects are created in part through their engagements with cinematic texts. Films offer spaces that enable subjects to articulate their desires, fashion themselves, and ultimately see possibilities that they never thought possible.

However, critiques are often leveled at mainstream cinema, purporting that the images presented are usually damaging, negative, and limiting for gay, lesbian, and queer spectators. One of the most well-known of these critiques is Vito Russo's *Celluloid Closet*, in which Russo presents us with depictions of gays and lesbians throughout cinematic history and shows us, The Gays, just how damaging and hurtful these images *about* us are *to* us. What do critiques like this really do? What do these critiques say about queer spectators who have articulated their worlds and fashioned themselves through engagement with cinematic Hollywood texts that are derided as 'negative?' Brett Farmer asks us to consider what this says about lesbians, gays, and queers "...who have not only had Hollywood cinema 'touch their lives' but have made it an integral, even foundational, component of those lives, and whose most intense and pleasurable

experiences have often been provided by the very films that this critical work seeks so vehemently to condemn?” (4-5).

The images, sounds, and narratives of the cinema do not simply reveal desire in a sort of representational mimesis, they teach us how to desire, they interpellate us into discourses of sexuality and provide us with the language to speak and hear ourselves (Farmer, 19). And, if all popular Hollywood cinematic images are inherently negative and damaging to queer people, how in the world have we come to exist? If the images of cinema do not allow for queer identification and deny the tools for self-fashioning and self-articulation, how does one explain queer spectators? Honestly, since when has a film being categorized as a “negative depiction” of queers ever stopped a queer from using it as a site to mobilize desires, fantasies and meanings (Farmer, 19)?

Throughout this project, I have attempted to employ the word ‘queer’ to refer to open-endedness and inclusivity of various possibilities. I do not see ‘queer’ to be, in any way, a limiting word. Though, arguing for a spectatorial positionality that attempts to deny being pegged down does make it somewhat tricky to theorize from that specific point and can lend itself to the criticism of being apolitical. It seems if there is to be any productive theorizing or political work, it must be organized around a particular identity; and as Butler states, “[t]hat any consolidation of identity requires some set of differentiations and exclusions seems clear” (359). Yet, the times in this project where I do deploy queer to refer to a congealed identity, I mean it in a way that does not close down future uses of that sign, does not limit and exclude what is now and what can or will be possible. In recognizing the temporal contingency of ‘queer’, it becomes a site of

contest and revision that has the ability to “...take on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee” (Butler, 359).

For this reason, I argue against the reviews and critiques of films that tout a ‘queerer than thou’ attitude; for these responses to films, or culture in general, that judge or deny certain articulations of queerness “...based on politics, style, sexual behavior, or any other quality, can only make queerness become something other than an open and flexible space” (Doty, xv). When queer is invoked within this project, it attempts to account for a vast range of expressions and positions in culture that just don’t line up appropriately; queer here recognizes that it is possible for various and fluctuating queer positionalities to be occupied whenever any person responds to culture (Doty, 3).

Some may argue that my invocation of the word queer in this project is not clear, it’s ambiguous, it’s confusing, it’s often contradictory—which is exactly the way it should be. Queerness here, in this project, is used to describe any identification, disidentification, or expression that can be marked as anti-straight, contra-straight, or non-straight (Doty, xv). A spectator does not have to be queer to have a queer identification and a queer does not have to watch films with queers in them in order to identify. In my view, a straight woman’s response to the sex scene between Mila Kunis and Natalie Portman in *Black Swan* is just as queer as the response of a self-identified lesbian spectator. Also, I think the use of queer also allows for articulations of desire and identity that do not rely solely upon sexual object choice or gender; queer can refer to matrices of desire that crisscross and intersect at race, class, ability, ethnicity, etc.

Ultimately my conception of queer and its usage throughout this project is one of openness and possibility.

Cinema is an important arena for the production of queer desires and meanings. The cinema offers information and ideas about ourselves and allows for an alternative horizon of experience where we can access meaning and pleasure that's not readily available elsewhere (Farmer, 19). We must not view films and what happens to the aesthetically mediated characters within them as the equivalent of what happens to 'real' people; but, through film, we are able to see that in the "...affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of our contemporary life" (Berlant, 13). Just because a certain film does not claim itself to be about queers, certainly does not mean that queers cannot find the film itself useful, nor do the images depicted have to be 'universally positive' for queers in order to identify with them. As Whatling states,

...identification and desire need not be limited to certain film texts or characters designated 'positively lesbian' but is rather multiple and contradictory. It can colonize films with no obvious lesbian credentials and appropriate them to its own agenda. It can embrace good characters and bad characters where such distinctions no longer hold a self-evident meaning... (Whatling, 164)

When thinking about films that had a huge impact on my self-formation when I was growing up, I recall that none of them had overt queer or lesbian imagery in them. None of them were explicitly about lesbians, in fact, many of them were very explicitly about heterosexuality. If mainstream Hollywood films are supposed to function to interpellate you and indoctrinate you into being a heterosexual, I never felt that way.

Many of the films I loved and watched repeatedly while I was growing up were (heterosexual) romance films; but, in watching them, I never felt like they were damaging to me, I never felt like they were denying me any identificatory outlets because I always disidentified. I always loved these films, and yet I always knew that I did not watch them the same way as other people did. I read myself into the moments where I did not fit; I saw myself there or reworked it so it made sense to me. I was not interpellated by these films in the way that I was intended to be. When I watched *Dirty Dancing* (1987), I never wanted to *be* Baby (Jennifer Grey) falling in love with Johnny (Patrick Swayze), or I never wanted to *be* Sandy (Olivia Newton John) when she finally gets Danny (John Travolta) (*Grease*, 1978). At the same time though, that does not necessarily mean I wanted to be Johnny or Danny as they got the girl; rather, I was able to imagine a world where (however problematic this may be) the narrative was the same, but *I* got the girl or the girl got me.

For queers, it's all about catching these little glimpses in films and investing emotions in them that don't necessarily correspond with the film's intentions. For instance, in *Dirty Dancing* there was always one particular scene that I always felt strangely drawn to. During the montage (set to "Hungry Eyes") of Johnny teaching Baby the dance so she can take Penny's (Cynthia Rhodes) place in the show, there is one scene where Penny and Baby are dancing together. It's not *really* a lesbian scene, they only touch hands, they don't kiss, they don't really show any expressions of sexual attraction; yet, I always felt a strong affinity for this part. Maybe because, however briefly, even if it the film didn't intentionally do so, I was able to see two beautiful women dancing

together and this meant something to me. Whatling says, “For the viewer...it does not ultimately matter whether the lesbian on screen gets the girl or not, what matters is that we, the audience, think that we might if we just look long enough. In appropriating these moments, regardless of their diegetic recuperation to heterosexuality, they operate as stolen moments, all the more tantalizing for their unlicensed nature” (110).

Just because these particular films depict ‘heterosexuality,’ as Whatling reminds us no film text belongs to any one constituency; “It seems as foolish to argue that any text is intrinsically lesbian as to argue that a text is exclusively heterosexual....we nevertheless live in a viewing world where we still have the chance to call everything our own” (3). Meaning, in the filmic world, we can call anything ours, we can see ourselves in anything, regardless of the supposed sexuality it represents. Watching films, then, is ultimately a transformative process in which the audience has the ability to alter the focus of meaning of a film text and read into the narrative what they most long to see (Whatling, 2).

This act of disidentification was never (and often times, still isn’t) a conscious process, it just happened. As Munoz reminds us, disidentification is a vital function and a means of survival for queers; it becomes habitual, like breathing or blinking. You don’t think about it, you just do it to live. Here in order to articulate the vast importance of disidentification in the formation of queer subjectivities, I find it helpful to quote Jose Munoz at length:

These practices of survival are, of course, not anything like intrinsic attributes that a subject is born with. More nearly, these practices are learned. They are not figured out alone, they are informed by the examples of others. These

identifications with others are often mediated by a complicated network of incomplete, mediated, or crossed identifications. They are also forged by the pressures of everyday life, forces that shape a subject and call for different tactical responses. It is crucial that such children are able to look past 'self' and encounter others who have managed to prosper in such spaces. Sometimes a subject needs something to identify with; sometimes a subject needs heroes to mimic and to invest all sorts of energies in. (38)

The practices of disidentification are learned through the examples of others, through a network of incomplete, mediated, or crossed identifications; it occurs in those spaces where things just don't seem to line up the way that they should, and that is okay.

Sedgwick believes that for many queers, the childhood ability "...to attach intently to a few cultural objects, of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relations to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival" (3). And it is in these spaces where meaning does not line up tidily that we invest with energy and fascination. It is okay to identify, or disidentify with an image that does not, or should not, line up with your identity; it is in these spaces of dissonance where queerness is most productive.

To argue that films must contain positive representations of queers in order for queer spectators to derive cinematic pleasure or usefulness from them is too simplistic. It is, for one thing, to assume that in order to experience pleasure in a film, queers must have a coherent sense of identity from which they can articulate what counts as positive. Queer people conceive of themselves in often contradictory ways and identities are subjectively articulated, provisional, contingent, and shifting. As Jonathan Keane argues

...excluded identities such as gays, blacks, and lesbians...do not often live in an Imaginary realm of coherence but are more likely to be only too painfully aware

of identity as incoherence...those marginalized by cultural hegemony find it almost impossible to experience identity as self-presence, as they are constantly positioned by the culture as its negative element while they are simultaneously constructed through other discourses to aim for mastery and positivity.” (Cited in Farmer, 7)

Meaning, there is never a stable subjectivity reached where one can articulate absolutely what is positive, what is not, and what images queers can use to articulate themselves and their desires.

Perhaps this constant awareness of identity as incoherence allows queers to be adept and avoid experiencing film through only one facet of subjectivity. We are all articulated in various discourses in various ways at various levels; identity is never a unified stable sign, it's a complicated field of subjective articulation that is provisional and shifting. Because of this, one cannot argue that any image is negative for gays, or wholly negative at all for that matter. As Whatling argues, it is the instability of the film texts which offer neither a wholly positive image of lesbianism nor a coherent account of heterosexuality that renders them so pleasurable, so interesting, and ultimately so appropriable to individual spectatorial desire (110).

Not only does disidentification function as a way for queers to view cinematic representations, it is also used by the critic as a hermeneutical process of “...decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (Munoz, 25). I have attempted to argue in this study that through disidentification, queer subjects can use cinema as a tool for self-fashioning while simultaneously recognizing and understanding the negative aspects of these particular films. Rather than ignore the problematic aspects, through

disidentification, queer subjects are able to rework those sites and critically interrogate why and how it is negative, and what needs to be done. Disidentification is not just the uncritical dismissal of cinematic images, either; it is to find usefulness in the image, those spaces in the representation that offers the spectator a new way of imagining alternate worlds and ways of being. In deconstructing these films through a queer viewpoint, I have hopefully shown that, often times, failure and ambiguity are the most productive sites for disidentification and worldmaking to take place. The concept of worldmaking characterizes the ways in which certain performances, both theatrical and quotidian, have the ability to alter the present, create a future, and map out alternative views of the world (Munoz, 195). Whatling reminds us that "... as readers of popular culture, we have to be as aware of declaring texts monolithically oppressive as we do of declaring their various misreadings as intrinsically radical..."(89).

The totalizing critiques that dismiss particular cinematic representations as negative miss many things; they miss the opportunity to productively critique the text in a way that does not just say "This image is bad because...", but instead contextualizes this cinematic representation and interrogates social or historical reasons why this image exists and to what network of discursive elements it speaks. No film or cultural text exists in a vacuum, they do not speak for themselves and they are made to speak to a network of different discursive devices. Through critical analysis of filmic texts, we are not only able to see what they say, but how and from what place it can be said; that is, how and in what ways is the symbolic space structured where this film event takes places. Interrogating films in this way opens up many spaces that are more productive than just dismissing a

film as ‘negative’ or ‘positive’; it allows us ask why is it negative, in what ways, what are the social structures in place that allow such an image to be depicted?

Rather than saying that the representation of Nina and her expression of sexuality is negative, it forces us to ask, why could it be perceived this way? In what ways does the film show us a negative image? Does the negativity stem from the implicit correlation between expression of female sexuality and insanity? If it is, then through disidentification, we can interrogate the background of discursively pre-constituted space in which this film is received. We can ask what mechanisms in the “real world” function in a way that renders female sexuality as deviant, how is the symbolic space structured so that female sexuality linked to insanity is a culturally intelligible correlation? Instead of saying that Nic and Jules are not queer enough because they mimic too closely the heteronormative familial structure that queers should have an inherent aversion to, it allows us to question why we think this. In what ways is this representation of familial structure harmful to queers and what are the possibilities for its restructuring in a way that does not replace ‘family’ with another oppressive institution?

The pervasive demand for images that represent queers in a ‘positive’ light serves neoliberal projects of regulation very well. Often, ‘positive’ representations of queers are only those who show them as being self-sufficient, mentally and emotionally stable, monogamous, productive citizens of society; the ‘negative’ representations of queers are often ones where they are promiscuous, trauma-ridden, and unstable. The ‘positive’ representation of queers sounds a lot like the ideal neoliberal subject; Lisa Duggan has coined this notion as “the new homonormativity.” The new homonormativity is a politics

that does not oppose the dominant heteronormative society, institutions or discourses, “...but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (Duggan, 50). Thus, the ‘positive’ image of queers only comes to mean those queers who want to marry, who want to serve in the military, who want to be domestic, and who want to consume; a ‘positive’ queer is ‘just like everyone else.’ These images show good queers to be docile, passive, and of little threat to the heteronormative hegemony. The proliferation of images like these, ones that purport to represent ‘positive’ queer citizens, buttress the political rhetoric of homonormativity, where

...‘equality’ becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, ‘freedom’ becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the ‘right to privacy’ becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. (Duggan, 66)

On the other hand, many of the reviews discussed in regard to the two present films, *Black Swan*, and especially *The Kids Are All Right*, seem to point to the notion that these films are not ‘positive’ because they are, in fact, *not queer enough*. This figuration of ‘positivity’ is (somewhat) different from the neoliberal call for positive images; yet, they both serve the same regulatory purpose. In this sense, policing the boundaries of what counts as queer places limits on queer expression and self-actualization; in a strange turn of homophobic rhetoric, it becomes “you can’t self-articulate in this way because it doesn’t represent real queer values” [insert Christian, conservative, family, etc. for ‘queer’]. I’m sure that these ‘queer’ regulatory projects have the intentions of being for some sort of noble cause that weeds out all the ‘fake queers’; but, when queers get in the

business of regulating themselves, what chance do we have? As Doty reminds us, “After all, in any of its uses so far, queerness has been set up to challenge and break apart conventional categories, not become one itself” (xv).

We cannot continue participating in the creation of identity categories and vigilantly policing those boundaries; the only option is disidentification and failure. Perhaps we should attempt to fail at identity rather than conform.¹ It is more important now than ever to actively resist one particular strand of gay rights whose core values are full access to marriage and military service at the expense of others who still would not have access if these rights were granted. We should not be advocating for the normalizing state regulation of queer sex, sexuality, and reproduction through the laws of marriage without regard to the implications this holds for issues of race, class, gender, sex, religion, ethnicity, and nationality (Duggan, xvi). Yet, at the same time, it is imperative to avoid the reification of queer as a stable identity category. To make the assertion that there is a representation that gets at the ‘realness’ or ‘authenticity’ of queer life is to assume that there is an authentic queerness to find. What is queer enough exactly? I, for one, am not sure that there is such a thing; for, as Sedgwick tells us, ‘queer’ resonates most when attached to the first person.

I believe that the critical analysis of film is very important cultural work that goes far beyond “just watching movies.” I often feel that I must defend my chosen academic pursuits by constantly justifying that what I do is important in ways that may not match up to certain standards of success. Yet, discursive analysis does have “real” and

¹ Of course, I acknowledge that this is not a viable option for everyone. Some people must assimilate into particular identity categories in order to survive.

important effects. It is necessary to critically analyze the ways in which films function as cultural artifacts that have an impact on aspects of everyday life and position them within the existing social, cultural, and institutional structures of power (Giroux, 3). Films, whether we realize it or not, have an enormous impact on the way we speak, the way we think, dress, act, and even our collective cultural memory. Situating films in broader discourses allows for the exploration of how films function as representational systems that are implicated in identity formation (Giroux, 13). Films have the ability to raise questions about the broader social landscape and in doing so, they are able to create spaces which expand the possibilities for critiques of these larger set of ideas, discourses, and institutions (Giroux, 7).

While I am arguing against the idea of any particular film being wholly ‘positive’ or wholly ‘negative, I do find it important to mention that I am certainly not advocating that *Black Swan* and *The Kids Are All Right* are without flaw; because they certainly are. The glaring issue in both of these films is the utter lack of characters of color; *Black Swan* has literally no character of color in the film whatsoever, and *The Kids Are All Right* has only three. As if the sheer lack of representation of people of color in *The Kids Are All Right* wasn’t enough, all three characters of color are depicted in a stereotypical manner and are treated as expendable by the central characters. The hostess at Paul’s restaurant is a Black woman with natural hair makes who sexual advances toward Paul often; she is cast off by Paul as not being worthy of commitment. The Latino gardener that helps Jules is fired under the false premise that he ‘has a drug problem’ when in reality he keeps sniffing because he is allergic to pollen. Joni has a best friend who is a

young man of color, she makes out with him at a party because she's upset about family issues; we never see him again the rest of the film. These situations are supposed to serve as moments of comedy, in the case of the gardener, or as simple situations that only move forward the story of the white characters in the film—the characters of color are fungible. This is highly problematic; but, at the same time, I assert that it is possible to disidentify from this issue in these films and still be able to find the productive possibilities in them. I certainly do not wish to trivialize race (or lack of) in these films, but it is important to not entirely dismiss these two films because they are overwhelmingly whitewashed.

Through disidentificatory readings of film, we are able to "...resist the social matrix of dominant publicity by exposing the rhetorical/ideological context of state power...Disidentification permits the subject of ideology to contest the interpellations of the dominant ideology" (168). While there is no "outside" of ideology, disidentification allows us to recognize the problematic aspects of ideology and resist them, restructuring them in a way that allows for new possibilities.

Disidentification has tangible capabilities as well; it isn't only a way to read films. Disidentification is able to make worlds, worlds with transformative politics and possibilities. Jose Munoz labels this product of disidentification as 'worldmaking' in that it has the ability to establish alternate views of the world; "These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people" (195). While of course in regard to film, this worldmaking through disidentification is only in fantasy; but, we must remember that film fantasy also creates subjects, and this fantasy is

articulated in real subjectivities through race, class, gender, and sexuality. Munoz goes on to assert that counterpublics are enabled by visions, or worldviews, that simultaneously reshape and deconstruct reality (196).

Counterpublics are the name that Munoz gives to the different groupings that fall outside of the majoritarian public. These subaltern groupings are often comprised of those whose designated genders, desires, or ethnic identities do not seem to fit into the majoritarian public sphere. The spaces created by and through disidentification are where these counterpublics can come into being: “Counterpublics are not magically and automatically realized through disidentifications, but they are suggested, rehearsed, and articulated” (Munoz, 179). Munoz conceives of counterpublics as spaces that are in opposition to other, heteronormative, social factions; he views counterpublics as “...social movements that are contested by and contest the public sphere for the purposes of political efficacy—movements that not only ‘remap’ but also produce minoritarian space” (148).

It is important here to reassert the importance of disidentification in creating these counterpublics. If counterpublics are real and actualized social movements, then disidentification is one of the tools important in constructing them. Disidentifying with certain cinematic images gives the audience the tools to imagine new possibilities of transformative politics in the form of counterpublics. Through the process of disidentification, the spectator is transported to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable, where it is possible to dissemble the image and use its parts in

order to create an alternative reality; “Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world” (Munoz, 196).

Though throughout this project I have discussed disidentification as a process of reading films, I hope to have used this conclusion to elaborate on the real world possibilities of disidentifying with film. I hope that my project has been clear in showing the potential disidentification holds in imaging new futures and building new worlds; ones that aren’t based on exclusion, but inclusion, however utopian that may be.

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